JAW OF THE DRAGON

CODY LEE

Prologue

The gazebo was a work of art. Pure white in color, it stood surrounded by a vast garden of some of the most colorful and vibrant flowers in the village. Sophie felt a little intimidated as she stepped past the cobbled stone path up to the gazebo. This place was reserved for use by the most esteemed Knights in the Order, a place where they can soak in natural beauty while discussing important matters. It had come as a bit of a shock that she had been invited to have tea here.

A single, blonde woman sat at the table in the gazebo, tea in one hand. She was glancing at a file she held in her other hand. She did not appear to have noticed her, but Sophie knew better than to make assumptions.

When she came within six steps of the Gazebo itself she bent over.

"Milady." She said, and curtsied. The woman looked up.

"Ah, Lady Langley." She said. "A pleasure to see you, truly… I trust you are well?"

"I am." Sophie said, trying to keep her voice formal. "I have not seen much of you, as of late Mother."

Lucille Langley set the file down. She glanced up at Sophie through her glasses, frowning. Sophie felt a pang of fear flash through her. She was sure that she was about to be reprimanded for being overly familiar to her superior.

"Sophita." She said. "Please. Have a seat."

Sophie stepped up to the dais and up to the table. She bowed again, hoping she was being reasonably formal, before taking her seat across from her. She watched Lucille expectantly as she gave her tea one last sip, before setting that down as well.

"These are." She said. "Difficult times for the Order."

Sophie said nothing. She sat with her hands folded across her lap, carefully taking in every little motion, every word. She hoped she looked the picture of a perfect lady knight.

“The Eye of the Dragon.” She said. “Wreaked havoc across this community. He killed several fine Knights and injured many more. Our dear friend Margaret Mire among them.”

Sophie nodded. The memory of Margaret’s passing haunted her, even now. She hadn’t cried. Not lately. But every time her death was mentioned it brought a strong pain in her chest.

“Their sacrifice.” The woman said. “Was not in vain. Through our combined efforts we defeated the Eye of the Dragon, and have him held here, deep in the prison of our Cathedral.”

Sophie bowed her head.

“It was too steep of a price to pay.” She said, her voice grim.

“It was not.” The woman answered. Sophie looked up, her eye flashing angrily, before the woman continued speaking. “You underestimate the value that the Eye of the Dragon possesses. You saw how much damage he caused by coming here, unprepared and with no allies. He had no plan, no strategy. And yet we could do nothing to stop him. He tore through our ranks like butter, slaughtering all who crossed his path. A dragon like that could very well have eliminated us all.”

Sophie bowed her head again. She had spoken out of turn.

“Be that as it may.” The woman continued. “I will not deny that these deaths have been a major blow to us. Critical operations all over the world have fallen to pieces. In part due to a lack of personnel, but also a severe loss of morale. Many knights lost beloved friends and comrade in this conflict, and the void will not be so easily filled.”

Sophie knew that if she spoke, she would only put her foot in her mouth again. She sat tight lipped.

“This is why.” The woman said. “Exceptional trainees are being considered for roles in the field. I’m told your friend Stella Maris is working under Captain De Le Ray.”

Sophie gave a soft smile. “That’s a good position for her. She loves the water.”

“She has been training her entire life for it.” The woman said. “And has already proven herself to be quite the asset. I have entered discussions with your teachers for you to do the same.”

Sophie had to stop herself from falling out of her chair at these next words.

“As your Mother.” Lucille Langley said, glancing at the file in front of her. “I feel that your teachers don’t have the best view of your potential as a Knight. They call you lazy and boy crazy. You’re often noticed daydreaming instead of training.”

Sophie could not believe it. Had her Mother really called her out here just to criticize her grades? She was just about to open her mouth to retort, but her Mother shook her head.

“I, however, have noticed that you possess a unique skill.” She said. “One that I feel, none other than myself have the capacity to perform. I think you alone have what our Order needs for our immediate future.”

Sophie swallowed.

“What is it?”

Lucille smiled.

“You are.” She said. “Perhaps the only person who understands how to control The Claw of the Dragon.”

There were no words between them. Silence filled the air.

“Jack?” She repeated. “What does he have to with me?”

“Everything.” Lucille answered. “Jack, in less than a year of training, has become far stronger than most Knights in the Order. He has become a monster. If he so desired it, he too could turn his wrath on us.”

“But he doesn’t.” Sophie said, a little bit confused. “He likes us.”

“Yes.” Lucille said. “For now.” She leaned forward. “Do you know why Jack respects me, so?”

“I do not.”

“It is because I offered him a chance.” Lucille said. “A chance to live the life he had, on a primal level, craved above all else. I took him away from his drab, boring, everyday life and pushed him to become something more. I helped him understand his true nature.”

Lucille’s glasses flashed in the sun.

“I was there for him, when no one else was.” She said. “His loyalty to me is unquestionable. He respects my wishes and does his best to see them through, to the best of his ability. He has trained his powers relentlessly over the past year, surpassing beyond human limits to become what he is today.”

She paused.

“And he will get stronger.” She said. “If I were to die, or if he were to lose faith in me, he would have no reason to stay aligned with the Order.

She adjusted her glasses. The light reflected off of them oddly, in such a way that Sophie could not make her eyes.

“You are my flesh and blood.” Lucille said. “You must be my proxy. You must keep Jack on a tight leash, by any means necessary, for as long as possible. Until our enemies must be destroyed.”

She set her hand on her tea.

“My hands are tied with keeping The Eye of the Dragon restrained… I cannot be there to deal with him as I once did.”

Her hand drifted away from the cup to the file.

“I have collected.” She said. “ A list of Ten individuals that need to be killed. Jack’s lust for blood is what truly drives him, Sophie. You must guide him, like a dog on a chain, to his enemy. And when the time comes… let him loose.”

Sophie took the file, her heart beating wildly in her chest.

“As of today.” Lucille said, as she got to her feet. “You are no longer a trainee. You are a full fledged Knight, with a mission. Pray you do not disappoint me.”

Ten Fighters Remaining

Bella Stone

Medusa

Greece

It was one of the most awkward trips Sophie had ever been on. She and Jack had made quite the odd pair, going through their airport and dealing with normal people. Sophie, being ten years younger, had to be the adult, reigning in Jack whenever he got distracted or had no idea what was going on. Mother had warned her that dealing with him was exhausting, but she had greatly underestimated just how much.

“Don’t tell me about the monster we’re after.” He had told her, before he had fallen asleep on the plane. “I want to go in blind.”

“Blind?” She shrieked, holding the file in front of her. “You could die!”

“Wouldn’t be fair.” Jack said. “If I have a plan and she doesn’t.” And he had refused to budge.

Sophie grimaced, bundling up the file in her hand. She had, in her fury, almost thrown it out and let Jack let himself get killed, but thankfully had chosen to preserve it.

Bella Stone. She had not been familiar with that name. She had heard a lot stories regarding the most dangerous people on Earth, but none about her. She found herself perusing the woman’s file while on route to Greece.

Officially, Bella Stone was a human who owned a gallery of stone statues that she presented to the public. She was considered a very beautiful, if somewhat eccentric wealthy woman who spent her days collecting the most exquisite stone statues in the world.

The reality, however, was very different. Bella Stone was a Medusa, a creature that could turn people into Stone with her gaze alone. Her

museum, composed entirely of those who were victims of her curse, was the only tourist attraction in a small community that desperately needed money from wealthy tourists. As a result, the corrupt humans allowed this creature to continue expanding her ever growing collection of whatever famous heroes she could get her hands on.

This kind of story was not at all uncommon throughout the world. Sophie had read the file thoroughly and wasn't quite sure what made Bella Stone such a high profile target. The standard process for killing Medusa, the Perseus method, still worked very well today. All one had to do was expose the creature to her own reflection to destroy it.

Jack's refusal to learn about the target ahead of time was a very dangerous decision for him. Sophie was sure that it was this kind of thinking attitude that led Mother to ask her to supervise him.

Well, on the bright side… the sooner he got himself killed, the sooner she could go home. The thought cheered her up, just a little bit.

The plane touched down at their destination without any issue. The normal people around them bustled, chatting amongst themselves pleasantly as Jack stood up, stretched, and yawned.

"Let's go get her." He said. She stared at him.

"Now?"

"Yes, now." He said. "I was ready before we even left the Cathedral."

He turned away from her and made his way off the plane. Sophie, panicked, turned and grabbed their things before trotting after him. She lugged around the giant suitcase with no effort, in spite of her size. She was much stronger than she looked.

"Where is she?" He asked conversationally once she had caught up with him.

"Not now!" Sophie hissed, casting dark looks all around. "We need to find lodgings, and rest…"

“You can handle that after the fight.” Jack said.

There was no arguing with him. Sophie whipped out her portfolio and perused it.

“From here.” She said. “We need to take a car and get to her museum.”

She had to handle the fare and chitchat around the airport, despite the language barrier. Jack took no notice of the people around them and refused to attempt to speak to them at all. Sophie found herself annoyed by this: it made him look like an absolute fool. She had to remind herself that this was exactly why she had been asked to lead him around to his targets.

The Museum was far bigger and grander than any of the buildings in the area. While most buildings they had passed were quaint little shops or modest homes, the Museum towered over them rather like a palace. It was a grand building, with beautiful marble pillars and floors.

It was also empty. Not a soul was in sight.

“This isn’t their tourist season.” Sophie noted. “Uh, should we knock?”

Jack climbed up the large, white staircase and approached the door. Sophie followed closely behind as he raised his hand.

CRRRRRRRRK

Jack punched forward, his fist splitting through the door and out the other side. He twisted his wrist around and unlocked it. When he pulled away he raised his leg and kicked it open. The crash resounded around the room.

“Must you be so deplorable?” Sophie asked, as they stepped across the threshold and into the house. “You’ve come to kill someone. You can at least knock.”

Jack waved his hand at her. She fell silent as her eyes slowly rose upwards, to the top of the beautiful stairwell in front of them.

Bella Stone was standing there, staring down at them impassively. Her hair was curled back in what appeared to be odd looking braids, but Sophie was sure that it was simply the snakes in her hair hiding amongst themselves. She was dressed in a bright green emerald dress that likely would have matched her skin if she hadn't been trying to pass herself off as human.

She raised the cigarette to her mouth and then lowered it, puffing out a little smoke.

"Welcome." She said, her voice cold. "To the Hall of Heroes."

Sophie shirked away from her as she descended the stairs, unwilling to meet her eyes. Jack, however, stood tall and unafraid, staring right at her.

"You are trespassing." Stone said quietly, but firmly. "I will give you a single chance to leave."

Jack rose his hand. His hand had become a beautiful blue claw.

"Over your dead body."

"How quaint." Stone said. "Tell me, sir… may I have the honor of learning your name?"

Jack lowered his hand. "It's Jack."

"Jack." Bella said, nodding. "Do you consider yourself a hero?"

"I don't consider myself anything."

Bella stared at him, as if trying to make sense of his words.

"In ancient Greek myth." She said, at last. "In the Age of the Gods…"

She turned around and walked back up the stairs, gesturing with her free hand to the ornate glass windows, where images of the twelve Olympians stared down at them, as if judging them.

"Heroes were men who were considered themselves to be above ordinary people." She explained. "They were exemplary warriors… they were cunning… they did not necessarily bow to petty morality."

She cast a look back at him.

“I can sense the same aura coming from you.”

Jack said nothing.

“Greek thinking.” Bella continued, as she continued her climb up the stairs. “is far more honest, and true to human nature than contemporary works. In modern day stories the hero is nearly flawless, untouchable. A beacon of morality and a standard that all men should aspire to be.”

She reached the top of the stairs and turned around, staring down at them once more.

“Greek Myth.” She said. “Emphasize the folly of human nature. How we are all selfish and cruel, how we all have petty desires that destroy us, and put us out of favor with the gods.”

She raised the cigarette to her lips again.

“And yet, they have survived the ages.” She said. “Longer than any man, longer than countries and kings. They stand tall, proud, until the end of the world crushes them completely.”

She threw the cigarette to the side and stood up tall.

“Tell me, Jack.” She said. “Which are you?”

Jack raised a clawed finger at all.

“I don’t care.”

Bella said nothing. She stared down at him with a calculating look.

“I don’t care about your heroes.” Jack said. “I don’t care about this place, or what you do here. All I’m thinking about right now… is tearing you to bits.”

“I see you are every bit the man I thought you were.” Bella said, as she turned around. Instantly the stone statues on either side of the giant staircase sprung to life and stomped their way over to him.

Bella Stone walked forward through the tall door at the top of the stairs, out of their sight, as the first statue, a giant minotaur, bore down upon them. It raised the axe in its hands over its head and brought it down onto Jack’s head.

He neatly stepped out of the way and stared up at the statue with a bored expression on his face. There was no thrill, no excitement, no fun in taking down an unliving opponent.

He brushed past the statue and made his way to the stairs. The second statue, which resembled a large, brutish man with a mighty broadsword cut him off. It raised its weapon and brought it down onto his head.

Jack raised his hand and stopped it. He dug his heels into the stair and, with a push, shoved the statue away. Despite its massive size, the sheer force of his push sent the statue over the stair rail, where it tipped over and went crashing to the ground, smashing to pieces.

The Minotaur had turned to Sophie, seemingly considering going for her next. She shook her head and stepped back.

"I will be waiting out front!" She called up to Jack. "Come find me when you're done!"

And she stepped back through the door.

The Minotaur turned back around to the stairs and followed Jack as he walked briskly up the stairs. He reached the tall door at the top of the stairs and tried the door. To his annoyance, it seemed to not have a handle.

He raised his fist, about to punch through it, but the Minotaur Statue came up from behind him and raised the axe above its head. In one smooth motion, Jack whirled around and kicked at it.

The statue tumbled down the stairs, and the sheer size and weight of the stone caused it to break into pieces as it rolled down the stairs. By the time it came to the bottom of the steps it was nothing but pure rubble.

Jack brought his hand back and again punched through the door, sending scraps of wood flying. It appeared that there was no handle on the other side either, so Jack raised his leg and kicked down the entire thing off its hinges.

He stepped through the broken door and looked around on either side of him. Statues of men and women lined the hallway on either side of him, staring silently at him.

"Do not worry." Bella Stone said quietly. "These are my most prized possessions. I will not send them after you."

She was standing at the other end of the hallway, smoking. She was staring at him, deep in contemplation.

"Tell me, boy." She said. "What is your goal? What do you want?"

"I want to kill you." Jack said. "You're strong, right?"

"Some would say so." Bella answered.

"That's all I want." Jack said. "To fight strong people." He smiled, showing off his perfect white teeth. Bella said nothing.

"I suppose." She said. "You are indeed greater than most men."

She cast a look at the statues on her left, and her right.

"Do you know what it is I do here, hero?" She asked. "I am an artist."

She stepped up to the statue closest to her and raised her hand to its face. She stroke it gingerly, staring at it.

"My powers." She said quietly, her gaze transfixed on the statue. "Allow me to preserve people in the prime of their life. Their exact appearance and figure are preserved, for generations afterward to value and appreciate."

She cupped the face of the statue with her hand.

"This man." She said. "Was an alchemist. He came very close to uncovering the secret to developing A Philosopher's Stone, but chose to leave his practice behind to cure a sick little girl. The Duke who had been financing his practice, in hopes of becoming immortal and wealthy beyond measure, would have had him killed… If, I had not saved him."

She moved down the row of statues, trailing her hand along them. She came to a stop to one further down.

“This girl.” She said. “Was a loyal servant of Amaris Yew. She believed very strongly in her mistress and served her faithfully, until she was forced to flee her castle. Most of the staff there found themselves serving new masters, in hopes of preserving the estate for the return of their mistress. But this girl found herself trekking against dangerous territory in hopes of restoring her master to power. She had many fine adventures, but in the end… met me.”

“And this…”

She moved further downward to a third statue.

“Is Mr. Sherlock Holmes.” She said. “The man who took down Professor Moriarty, a notable member of the Black Cat Club… the group that now controls every company in the world.”

Her eyes flickered to Jack as she moved on down the row.

“These people.” She said. “Left such a strong impression on me when I met them that I felt that it would be a loss to the world if I did not turn them to stone.”

She stopped right in front of Jack.

“Tell me, Jack.” She said. “Does your story compare?”

Jack raised his fist and struck her across the face. She let out a cry as she fell backward, rolling around the ground several feet before coming to a stop.

“I told you before.” He said. “I just want to fight you.”

Bella Stone rubbed her chin contemplatively as she stood up. She angled her legs into a fighting position. She raised her hands above her head and gripped her the bindings in her hair, as if preparing to rip them out.

“I suppose then.” She said at last. “That I will grant your one desire.”

She pulled them loose, and instantly the thick snakes sprung upward, hissing and moving about. Bella closed her eyes, and held her hands out in a defensive position.

The Snakes turned toward him, hissing violently, their mouths wide and agape. Jack looked at them and swiped with his claw.

It came very close to cutting a head off. The snake reeled back, hissing violently. Bella stepped in, her head bowed, and the snake darted forward, aiming for Jack's unarmored upper arm.

Jack punched in a vicious hook, knocking the side of Bella's head and sending her sprawling once again. She rolled across the floor and slammed into the wall.

Before she stopped completely, however, the statue right next to her leaned over and picked her up. She was hoisted back to her feet, eyes still closed, and resumed her fighting stance.

"What are you…?" She whispered. "Why haven't you turned to stone?"

Jack cracked his neck.

"I'm strong." He said. He advanced upon her, his powerful legs shattering the stone under his feet with each step. Bella raised her guard again. The Snakes in her hair began to grew longer, and began to grow even more aggressive.

Jack raised his hand for another strike, but this time Bella caught his arm mid step, She cried out as he pulled her back for another blow, but before he could manage it all eight of the serpents sunk their teeth into his arms, shoulders, and neck.

Jack cried out in pain as he Bella adjusted herself. She smiled, and let out a flurry of precise blows to his stomach here with her hands.

Jack stumbled backwards, the snakes relinquishing their hold on him as she turned back around, grimacing.

"My apologies." Bella said. "I do not often have to fight my enemies."

"You don't need to apologize." Jack rasped. Bella turned around, surprised, as Jack slowly got to his feet. He was gasping, clearly struggling for breath.

"You received eight viper bites." Bella said. "There is enough poison flowing through you to kill a creature ten times your size."

“I’m sleeping with a girl whose entire body is poison.” Jack answered. “I don’t think your snakes bother me.” Despite his words he seemed somewhat unsteady on his feet. Bella opened her eyes briefly to get a look at him, and then shut them again.

“Immune to poison, and petrification…” Bella murmured. “No wonder you believe that you can destroy me.” She waved her hands.

Immediately the stone floor under her shifted, sending her careening across the room at an incredible speed.

Jack gritted his teeth as he watched Bella Stone make her way to the other end of the hall.

“You BITCH!”

Jack chased after her, but she managed to escape through two large double doors before he could reach her. These doors were guarded by two more statues. Which, like their brethren outside, came to life and attacked.

They simultaneously raised their weapons, and brought them down on him. Jack raised his arm and blocked the axe strike, and pushed it aside, but the spear came in immediately afterward, and he found it difficult to stop properly. He was forced to hold his armored claw against his chest, preventing the strike from reaching his heart.

He grimaced as his awkward position caused him to slide backwards, back towards the Hall of Heroes.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaar!”

He seized the spear, and with a mighty lurch, twisted and pulled it over his head, taking the entire statue with it. The giant mass of stone, possibly weighing at least a ton, flew through the air and slammed into the floor, rather like a giant hammer.

Jack adjusted his position, and spun the statue back around, sending it flying at the other statue, shattering them both into pieces and destroying the wall.

The pieces were still moving as he stepped over them and into the hall. One of the hands tried to grab at his leg, but he crushed it with

his foot. He barely noticed: His attention was only on his enemy.

“Bella Stone!” He screamed. “Where are you?”

The giant statue of a triceratops stood in front of him, unmoving. He ignored it, stepping over the broken bodies of his former enemies and further into the Museum.

When the statue came alive, and charged, Jack whirled around and grabbed it by the horns. The statue, thrashed about, trying to throw him off balance and impale him, but Jack stood firm. He twisted his arms and sent the statue slamming into the ground, with so much force that the floor shattered into pieces.

He snapped off the horns and kicked its midsection, shattering it into pieces, and then turned back around.

“Where are you?” He snapped, losing his patience. He looked around. The statue around him, which seemed to be those of a variety of different dinosaur species, sat unmoving. He walked through them, eyeing the stegosaurus warily, expecting the spiked tail to swing around and clobber him.

Instead it was the head that turned around.

“Hero.” The stegosaurus spoke. “You are quite the adversary.”

Jack spit at its face. The spit dripped over its stone eyes and down its face.

“Most heroes.” The statue said. “Are not able to resist petrification. Those that can are unable to handle my Medusa She Quan. You have survived both. For that, I commend you.”

The statue bowed its head. Jack raised his hand and was about to clobber it when the head rose again.

“You will be my most prized possession.” The statue said. “When I find a way to turn you to stone.”

“I am no one’s possession.” Jack said. “I’ll keep fighting until I’m dead.”

The statue chuckled.

“You truly are a hero!” It said. “I have never, in all my years, met someone like you!”

He turned around to see the Triceratops he had thrown to the ground slowly staggering upward. The stone that he had broken into dust were reforming to rebuild the statue, exactly as it how been before.

“My art.” She said. “Will last for eternity.”

The triceratops charged again. This time when Jack grabbed it, he swung it around behind him, clobbering the stegosaurus statue as well. He sent the triceratops flying, and it tore through a number of the other statues as it made its arc through the museum, before slamming into the wall.

“But will you?” Jack asked, as he glanced around the room. She clearly wasn’t anywhere near him. She wanted to play a game of cat and mouse.

He made his way to the door and kicked it open. It blew off its hinges as he made his way into the next room. He found himself facing a small, beautiful staircase, draped in a crimson shade, circling the giant statue of a man holding up the world. The ceiling rose high above the staircase, and the stained glass windows covered the room in a gentle, warm light.

Jack climbed up the staircase, hardly noticing the statue’s head moving to look at him. He opened the door on the next floor and stepped inside.

The inside of this room was far less organized. Dozens of statues of bizarre creatures stood, frozen in time, clawing and biting at one another. A gigantic centipede like creature with pincers the size of a dog reared up, facing a giant face of a man, that seemed to be held aloft by six wings on each side of its body. Its face was strangely contorted, as if it was in great pain.

The statue’s face moved.

“Ah, please.” The statue said. “If you don’t mind… I would prefer you not to fight these statues.”

“Why?”

“J don’t want you damaging the art, as you have been doing.”

Jack stepped up to one, a giant who towered over the rest.

“I’d love to fight them.” He said, sounding a little disappointed.

“Please.” Bella Stone said. “I will fight you with everything I have, I promise you.”

Placated by this, Jack turned his attention to the next door.

“I am waiting for you on the next floor. Please…”

Jack shook his head, but made his way through the room and towards another door. Another beautiful staircase lay before him, and up he ascended again.

It seemed this time he had left the museum proper and found himself in a more residential part of the building. A little green tea set sat on a little table that seemed to be made for guests. Jack stepped forward, and into the next room.

He saw Bella Stone standing with her back facing him. At first glance she seemed to be intently staring at her own reflection in the giant, ceiling tall mirror in the center of the room, but her eyes were closed.

“Ah, Hero.” She said. She waved her hand, as if to welcome him. “You have surpassed all of my expectations. If I had allowed you to continue, you would have torn apart the entire museum. For me, that would have been a fate worse than death.”

“You want to die?”

“I do not.” Bella Stone said. She turned around to face him. The snakes in her hair coiled, hissing, standing upright on her head. “No one does. But I would gladly choose death over allowing you to destroy my life’s work.”

She waved her hand around again. “This museum.” She said. “And everything in it… is a product of my centuries long quest to

document the greatest heroes in the world, and allow their visage to be enjoyed forevermore."

She lowered her hand to the shawl wrapped around her neck. "Everything you have fought here, Hero, is a living creature. Not a mere statue, but a being petrified by my powers. They were petrified at the height of their powers, after I had deemed them worthy. And you…"

She threw the shawl aside and raised her hands, again taking the Snake Fist stance. "Will be the crown jewel of my collection."

"I belong to no one." Jack said, as he raised his fists.

She darted forward, keeping her head bent, as she swayed side to side, rather like a viper. The snakes in her hair picked up, hissing, each of their eyes on Jack. Her head was tilted unusually low, almost to the ground. She was not looking at him at all.

Jack jabbed forward and grabbed hold of one of the vipers on her head. It hissed wildly, struggling vainly against his grip, as the other seven adjusted themselves and attacked. They again tried to penetrate his arms with their fangs, only to meet impenetrable scales. Bella stepped forward, her hands poised to strike, and again a sharp blow hit Jack on the chest.

He winced somewhat, but this time raised his free hand and struck her across the face. The force of the blow sent her head reeling back, but Jack's firm grip on the vipers kept her from flying through the air. He pulled her closer and struck her again, this time more viciously.

The vipers, sensing an opportunity to strike exposed flesh, struck again, this time attacking Jack's chest and upper arms. Their teeth and fangs penetrated his skin perfectly.

Bella Stone raised her arm and tried to knock Jack off balance with a swipe against his arm. She struck the fleshy bicep rather than the forearm. Although the blow was solid, Jack barely reacted. Instead he simply hit her again.

She gasped, spit flying out of her mouth. There was no doubt, now. Her viper venom had no effect on him, and her martial arts were ineffective against his style.

Bella waved her hand upward, and in one brutal motion ripped the viper in Jack's hand from her head. The viper let out an anguished shriek as it was pulled away from her head. She backed away, hands held in front of her defensively, as Jack pulled away, the viper still in his grip. He crushed it, staring intently at her.

"My commendations, hero." She said. "I have not been overpowered in a long time." The stump where the viper head had just been was bleeding rather profusely.

She turned away from him, the vipers on her head settling down somewhat.

"Where are you going?" Jack snapped, as he took a step forward. "Do you think we're done?"

"On the contrary, hero." She said, as she faced the large mirror. Her eyes were once again firmly closed. "We have only just begun."

Jack took another step forward. The Medusa opened her eyes.

The effect was immediate. Her entire body hardened, becoming fully stone. The blood pouring out of the open wound closed immediately. The stone creature turned and stared at him.

She raised her hand and closed it into a fist.

"Ha." Jack said, as he imitated the movement. "That's right. Give me everything you've got."

The Stone Medusa charged at him, and their fists collided. Her fist of stone shattered upon impact with Jack's closed claw, and when she came around for another punch Jack countered again with one of his own.

His third punch was aimed straight at her head, but he was caught off guard when she raised the broken arm of her statue and jabbed at him. In what seemed like a flash, the broken pieces of the statue reformed back into an unblemished stone fist.

The blow caught him completely off guard. The power of the uppercut lifted his feet off of the ground. He winced, clenching his teeth as his enemy grabbed him, and in one fluid motion slammed him to the ground.

The floor cracked. Jack lay there, staring upward, as the Stone monster descended on him, her fists raised. He rolled out of the way as the blow came down on him, and struggled to get to his feet as Bella advanced with another downward punch.

He rolled out of the way again, and again, and again, until he was forced to admit to sweep her leg out from under her to get some breathing room. However, her leg was so firmly planted on the ground that she didn't even budge. This time, her punch connecting squarely to his face.

His head slammed back into the stone floor, blood spurting out of his nose. He gasped, taking in a breath of fresh air, as she brought down a second fist.

She slammed him again, and this time he felt his skull crack against the stone floor. Blood was spurting out of his skull. He felt dizzy.

She raised her fist for another punch, but this time Jack lurched suddenly, throwing her off balance for a split second, which he used to take a swing at her face, shattering it into pieces with a well timed punch.

She rolled off him as he got to his face, clutching his head and staring down at her. She glanced up at him, through a cracked stone face. Pieces of her broken face fell to the ground at her feet.

She straightened herself, and the broken pieces flew back up and reassembled themselves back to where they had come. The cracks melded, forming into a smooth, flawless figure.

Jack rubbed his still bleeding head and snorted.

"I guess I'll have to pound your entire body to dust." He said. He lowered his hands into a fighting position. She copied the movement. They stared each other down, and then began to assault

one another. Fist met fist, and with each blow Bella's hand shattered, only to quickly restore itself before she launched her next strike.

Jack, sensing an opportunity, adjusted his rhythm. He jabbed in once, and then immediately again, so quickly that he broke apart both fists at nearly the same time. He brought his hand back somewhat, and jabbed it forward again.

It went straight through her skull. Jack cried out in triumph as the stone statue stepped backward, flailing aback, its arms whirling to regain its balance. He descended on it, beating it mercilessly with his fists, shattering more and more of it into pieces.

She was nothing more than a pile of rubble when he was finished. He sighed, taking a step back and staring down at her.

"You're no warrior." Jack said disparagingly, as his claws turned back to human hands. He rubbed the back of his head, observing the wound. "The floor did more damage to me than you did."

He cast one last look at the pile of rubble, before yawning. Bored, he turned away, and was beginning to make his way back to the entrance hall when the statue began to shake.

He turned around to see the pieces of the statue slowly began to put themselves back together. The body was beginning to take its original shape.

"You're going to have to do better than that!" Jack snapped, as he jumped on her again. This time he pounded her body into dust.

The dust rose upward, covering his face and hands. He pulled away from her remains, satisfied that all was well. He took in a deep breath of air and sighed.

"Who's next?" He asked himself, as he again turned away. He brushed the dust away from his hands as he made his way to the door.

A large blow came at the back of his head. He staggered, whirling around to face his assailant.

The arms and legs of Bella Stone were floating above the ground, rotating in midair. Jack stared at them, eyeing them warily. The hands closed themselves into fists, and then darted at him. The legs quickly followed suit, in a swinging arc.

Jack raised his arms to block the incoming blows. The first fist went for his head, but the second went for his stomach. The attacks came at once, from widely different angles. The first slammed straight into his guard, shattering upon impact with his clawed hands. The dust surrounded his face and his eyes, and he gasped out in pain as the second fist hit his stomach.

He reeled, the dust completely blinding him as the legs swung at him, one knocking into the back of his head and the second kicking upward at his chin. These blows were brutal: He was not prepared for them at all.

He staggered around blindly as the arm and legs moved in for more strikes. He was unable to defend himself as they bludgeoned him, again and again. He fell to his knees, gasping, as again and again the legs bludgeoned him. The hand floated in mid air, poised, preparing itself for a critical strike.

Jack forced his eyes open. With a frightening scream, he ignored the scratchy feeling in his eyes and attacked. He swung his clawed fists wildly, smashing into the arm. He lunged forward, grabbing a large chunk of the arm in his hand, and crushed it.

Her legs hit him again, from behind, and he cried out, falling to the ground. He rolled, his grip firmly grasping onto the stone dust in his hand, as the statue began to reform.

Save for the severed strand of snake like hair, the statue looked almost completely intact, save for a large chunk missing from its right arm.

“You are.” Bella Stone rasped, raising her good arm at him. “Art.”

Jack grimaced, as he tightened his grip on the stone dust in his hand. It was desperately trying to flitter out from in between his

fingers to rejoin the rest of the statue. That could not be permitted to happen.

He raised his closed fist to his mouth slipped the dust into it. He choked back a startled cry at the taste, and swallowed.

Bella Stone stared. For the first time, she looked afraid.

Jack rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand and grimaced at her, showing off his teeth. Inside him the dust lurched and bounced, but to no avail.

"You're insane." Bella Stone whispered. Jack retook his fighting stance.

"I'm a winner."

Bella Stone raised her arms to try and defend herself, but this time Jack swerved in from her weakened side, and clobbered at her shattered arm. When it shattered into dust, Jack let out a ferocious hook to her side, splitting it in half. The statue broke, and Bella's upper half flipped over. Her frozen in stone expression did not change. She raised her good hand and tried to jab at his eye with her finger, but Jack grabbed her arm and threw her to the ground, shattering her to bits.

The legs kicked out at him vainly, but he easily avoided them. He leaned down and with one fell swoop scooped up a chunk of the dust the stone had left behind. Without a second thought he consumed it, ignoring the rough, inedible texture.

When the statue reformed again Bella Stone was missing a large chunk of her midriff. She struck out at him again, but Jack threw both of his hands inside of her, and then split them apart. Once more she broke in half, sending pieces of her stone body flying. He made a jab for her head and managed to grab hold of one of her snakes. She cried out as he ripped it off, breaking off a large chunk of her head.

He crushed the snake in his hand and watched as the statue began to reform. Bella Stone stood in place, staring up at him with her cold, stone gaze, as he raised the dust to his lips and swallowed.

He smiled, staring down at her unmoving figure.

His smile turned to shock as the stone body began to melt away, and the living Medusa burst forth from the statue. The wounds had not healed: blood was squirting from her visible brain, and her arm hung limply at her side.

"Hundreds of heroes I have bested!" Bella Stone cried out. "But History will remember you as the one who vanquished me!"

She fell to her knees, and then flat on her face. She was still. Jack grimaced, as a living snake burst from his mouth and tried to bite his nose.

He ripped it out, tossed it to the ground, and stomped on it, crushing it under his weight.

BELLA STONE

DEAD

"Milady Langley. It is done."

Sophie tilted her head backward and sighed.

"Yes." She said, into the phone. "Jack won the battle. Bella Stone is dead. We have seized the Museum, and her property. None of the statues were harmed."

She listened, nodding.

"Many were destroyed, but Bella Stone used her skills to rebuild them, as they were." She said. "I think it will be possible to revive them."

Mother asked her a question.

"It was not an easy battle." Sophie said. "If Jack was not immune to petrification and poison, he would have been killed."

That is why we sent him. She was told.

"Yes…" Sophie said, sounding a little tired. "He wants to move on to the next battle. Do I have permission…?"

You may proceed at your own discretion.

“Perhaps in a couple of weeks, once he’s rested.” Sophie said, casting an eye behind her. After Jack had eaten his fill and cleaned up, he had gone straight to sleep. “His enemies will only become even more powerful.”

She hung up the phone and perused the dossier on their targets. Bella Stone was dead, so she separated the file from the others and flipped the page.

The Suneater, Kojack Fenrir was smiling up at her. He had been fifteen when that photo was taken, the same age she was now. She tried to ignore how cute he was as he perused the relevant information.

A werewolf born in Washington State, Kojack was born to a family of Fenrir Werewolves. He had four brothers and one little sister. His family proudly served the Wolf of Freedoms, a coalition of werewolves who prided themselves on living peacefully among humans.

Unlike the rest of his family, Kojack became disillusioned with his community’s values, and sought to embrace the violent and savage nature of his ancestor, the Wolf Fenrir. Many of the secrets of this great god had been lost to time, but it was believed that Kojack had uncovered more of them than any other werewolf in modern history.

He was, they said, the most dangerous werewolf alive today.

She closed the dossier and looked at Jack doubtfully. If she had her way, she would go back to the Order of the Dragon and request Belladonna, the born werewolf killer, to step in and battle him. But it was not her decision to make. Lucille was very clear. It needed to be Jack.

Nine Fighters Remaining

Kojack Fenrir The Suneater

Werewolf

Castillo Yew, Spain.

After a brief respite in the village at the base of the Cathedral and some quality time alone with his girlfriend Belladonna, Jack was eager to return to the fray. It was Sophie's decision when they were to go, so he pestered her near constantly, in between searing bouts of pain from his injuries and affairs with Belladonna.

"We will leave when you are ready to fight!" She snapped at him, more than once. But finally, the day came. The two of them boarded the plane to their next destination, Spain.

"We are heading to a particularly dangerous location." Sophie informed him. "Castilllo Yew, the estate of the Vampiress Amaris Yew. One of the most dangerous women in the world."

"We're fighting a vampire?"

"No, a werewolf." Sophie said, annoyed. "Amaris Yew hasn't lived there in over fifty years… the castle is currently under occupation by a man named Kojack Fenrir… more famously known as Suneater."

Jack scratched his nose.

"I think I'd rather fight the vampire."

"I think you need to take this more seriously." Sophie said, flaring up at once. "Suneater is a Fenrir Wolf: the largest and most dangerous in the world. He has pushed the limitations of his powers far beyond that of a normal werewolf."

"So did Bella Stone, the Medusa, and looked what happened to her."

"Suneater will be more dangerous for you, Jack!"

Jack yawned and leaned back in his chair. Sophie glared at him.

"Fenrir Wolves." She said. "Require the aid of the full moon to transform and unleash their full powers. But Suneater has discovered a method to transform, even during the day."

"Good." Jack said, sleepily. "I wouldn't want to get the drop on him on a bad day."

She glowered at him as he closed his eyes.

They touched down in Spain on a bright, sunny day. Jack paid no heed to the sights or the local girls: his attention was fixed solely on their destination.

"Your next opponent is the current Castellan of Castillo Yew." Sophie informed him, as they entered their car. "It is an ancient vampire abode, filled with dark artifacts and an evil history."

Jack looked at her. "You know, you can be just as boring as your Mom."

Sophie privately tried to hide her displeasure at this comment. "Your opponent may find a way to use the location to his advantage. The Castle itself is brimming with ancient magic."

Jack yawned. Sophie pressed onward, anxious to make her point understood.

"It's an Unholy place." She said. "Demons have been known to appear there. The souls of Amaris Yew's victims linger in her dungeon, wailing endlessly-"

She stopped. Jack had fallen asleep. "Fine." She snapped, losing her patience. "I hope you die, then."

She was still in a bad mood as the skies around them began to darken, somewhat, and the bright, warm beaches began rather dark and morose. The trees became more twisted and gnarled, and the businesses and residences became fewer and fewer, until there was nothing left but empty road.

The Castle was grand, and stood right next to the beach. Sophie was surprised to find that she found it elegant, and beautiful.

They came to a stop and stepped out of the car, staring up at the building. A girl was waiting for them.

"Vampire." Sophie hissed, as they walked up to her.

"Vampire." Jack repeated, sounding interested. Sophie rolled her eyes.

"Welcome." The vampire said, as she tipped her hand to them. "To Castillo Yew." Her hair was a dirty blonde, and her figure was rail

thin and rather frail. Her smile, however, was bright and wide. Sophie had learned the names of each of the twelve vampire maids of Castillo Yew by heart during her training… but at some point after the test had completely forgotten all of them. She had no idea who this was.

"The Master is expecting you." The Vampire said. "Pray, come."

"You first." Jack said lazily. The vampire, who had half turned to open the door for them, shot him a wide, suggestive smile. Sophie scowled.

"Have you forgotten Belladonna?" She hissed. Jack patted her on the head affectionately, causing her to wince, and fall silent.

"The Master was pleased when he heard you were arriving soon." The Maid told them, as she led them through a beautiful, gothic entrance hall, with a grand staircase that led to the floor above. "It has been too long since his last battle… far too long."

She glanced back at them both. "The Master hopes that you will dine with him, before battle." She said.

Sophie grabbed Jack's arm. "I'm not giving you blood, woman." She snapped. The vampire laughed.

"No, no, you have the wrong idea." She said. "The master simply wishes to know his enemy. That is all."

Sophie didn't look too reassured. She cast suspicious looks at the blonde vampire as she led them through a gigantic hallway, lined with paintings and suits of armor that saluted as they passed.

They entered a gigantic dining room, with a long table. Sitting at the end of the table, with a fireplace to his back, was Suneater. He was a big man… bearded, large and muscular. He looked quite a bit older than he really was, perhaps in his mid-thirties. The mane of black hair looked wild and unkempt.

"Ah, welcome." Suneater said. "Have a seat."

The vampire bid them follow at the other end of the table. Two plates were set out for them. Sophie, feeling a little self conscious,

sat at the spot set out on the side, while Jack sat at the spot at the end of the table, facing their enemy.

"We're having steak." Suneater said. "Sonny?"

"It'll be ready in a jiff, wolfman." She said cheekily.

"Cut that out." He snapped. The vampire maid laughed, shot one last look at Jack, and then departed. Sophie could see the kitchen as she stepped through the door.

"The maids." Suneater said. "Are loyal to the Castle. Not to me. If I should fall here today, their loyalty will pass on to you… the man who controls the castle."

He was a lot bigger than most men, Sophie thought. Jack, being about average size and weight, was probably about half his size. His beard was so thick and bushy that she could not make out his face, but yet she was secretly quite pleased to see he was shirtless, as was the traditional werewolf fashion, covered in massive scars and rippling muscles.

Sonny the vampire came back out carrying plates sizzling steaks, steamed broccoli, and corn.

"Did you make this?" Jack asked.

Sonny shook her head. "No, it was the castle's chef, Portia."

"Another vampire?" Sophie asked.

"Vampires can cook, you know." Sonny told her, admonishingly. "Isn't that right, Master?"

"Wouldn't keep you around if you couldn't." Suneater grunted, as he looked down at his plate. He raised the knife and fork and began cutting his steak. Sonny glowered at him for a moment, her friendly demeanor vanishing in an instant. But when she turned around to look back at Jack, she was smiling.

"I hope you win." She said. "Master."

She winked and made her way back to the kitchen. She wiggled her hips slightly as she stepped through the door. The three of them

were left alone.

"So." The voice of Kojack Fenrir the Suneater rumbled from the other side of the table. "You are the Claw of the Dragon."

He took a giant mug of liquid into his hand and drank from it. He set the mug back down and belched. Sophie winced.

"I've been looking forward to meeting someone like you." He said. "I've never tasted dragon flesh.."

Jack leaned closer to him, from across the long table. His steak was almost completely untouched. "And you never will."

Suneater threw back his head and laughed. "I like you, Jack!" He crowed. "I thought I would."

He gestured to the plate. "Eat." He instructed. "And enjoy it. It's not poison. I wouldn't want you weak when we do battle."

Jack looked down at his plate, and for a moment Sophie thought he would pick it up and throw it aside. But instead he did as he was told.

Suneater sat watching them, his expression unreadable through his thick beard.

"This Castle." He said. "Is a Battlefield."

Jack stopped eating and looked at him.

"I did not conquer this castle for its wealth, or its history." Suneater said. "I conquered it because it attracts bloodthirsty people like you."

He was watching Jack very closely. Jack had stopped in place, right in the middle of cutting into his steak.

"Keep talking like that." Jack said, his voice slow and deliberate. "And I won't get the chance to eat first."

"You're looking forward to this just as much as I am, aren't you?"

Jack set down the knife and fork.

"Yes." He said bluntly. "I am."

They stared at each other. Sophie could feel it in her bones that a fight was about to break out.

And then suddenly Suneater laughed. “Oh, I like you, Jack! I like you very much!”

He took the knife and fork in his hand and cut his own steak. He raised the piece to his mouth and bit into it. Sophie noticed with a bit of revulsion that it looked raw.

“I.” Suneater said. “Am very much like you, Jack.” He chewed as he spoke. “I too was born with incredible power. I was trained from a young age in the ways of combat, and taught that I should protect and respect people by my family.”

He swallowed his meat, and smiled.

“It was not until I became a man that I began to hate them.” He said. “I want to live for myself, Jack, Not for others.”

“You can’t live without killing.” Jack told him. Suneater threw back his head and laughed again.

“Oh, you do understand!” He crowed. “Better than anyone I’ve ever met!”

He placed his hand on the table and stood up. “There’s nothing wrong with killing your enemies and enjoying yourself while you do.” He said. “It’s nature… the way of the world. Civilization has done nothing but destroy our bodies and souls.”

He thumped his chest.

“I cannot change the world… but I am free to live my life as I see fit! I have embraced my heritage, and honor the Great Fenrir in battle!”

Jack slowly took a bite out of his own steak and stared up at him.

“So are we going to fight or not?”

Suneater raised his hands and slammed it down on the table. The entire thing split in half, down the middle. Jack leaned forward and neatly scooped his plate off the surface of the table and handed it to

Sophie in one fluid motion. She took it, flinching slightly, as she backed away.

"Uh, I'll just… put this away…" She murmured, awkwardly, as she made her way to the room in the back. The vampire maid opened the door with a flourish and smiled at her invitingly. Sophie backed away, and made her way through another door.

Jack stood up and kicked at the table, sending the two halves of the table flying upward and out of the way, and took a fighting stance. Suneater copied the movement, raising his fists in an identical stance.

Jack slowly crept closer to him, his eyes on his opponent, and Suneater followed suit. They continued this way until they were at a very close distance from one another. Jack extended his arm, and Suneater extended his, and they their forearms crossed. They stood there for a moment, staring at one another. The room was silent.

Jack's hand transformed into a claw as he swiped his hand across Suneater's face, drawing blood. Suneater grimaced, and counterattacked with a vicious uppercut, that caught Jack square on the chin.

He had never been hit so hard in his life. His feet raised clear off the ground as Suneater followed up with another punch, that came so quickly that Jack had not even begun to fall back down. This blow caught him square in the stomach, and he found himself bending over in mid air. He spit at Suneater's face, trying to blind him out of desperation, but he swiftly tilted his head to avoid the splash and hit him again, sending him flying through the air and slamming into the wall.

The stone shattered as Jack slammed into the stone. He slid down to the floor, still seeing stars, as Suneater quickly leapt over to him, flying through the air with an almighty leap. Before Jack could even get his bearings, Suneater was on him, punching wildly, drilling him further through the stone. He was like a jackhammer… each punch sent Jack's frame deeper into the stone.

Suneater wound himself up, and with a single mighty blow shattered the wall, sending Jack tumbling backwards into thin air. He flailed wildly, trying to reorient himself in midair, as Suneater stepped off the newly formed ledge and dropped down on him with a mighty kick.

They fell onto a spiral staircase. Jack fell onto the steps with a sickening crunch. Suneater's leg twisted somewhat due to landing on an unusual angle. Thinking blindly, Jack grabbed his leg and pulled. Suneater let out a yelp and was pulled down the stairs. Jack kept his grip on him, and soon was rolling along with him.

Suneater snarled at him and lurched at his face, trying to bite, but was met with a fist. His face cracked against the stone step, and blood poured out of his head, leaving a trail of blood on the steps as they rolled.

They hit the bottom of the stairs and Jack pinned him to the floor. He raised his arms and pounded him relentlessly with his fists. Suneater recoiled, taking each blow, as he tried to throw Jack off balance with his legs.

Jack grimaced, and steadied his position. He raised his hand for another strike, when Suneater opened his mouth wide.

"HWWWWWWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

The howl was so ear splittingly loud that Jack had no choice but to place his hands over his ears to try and block it out. Suneater knocked him off of him and leapt to his feet. They faced each other and took fighting positions.

"You are more power than technique." Suneater noted. "You have not been training long."

Jack spit on the stone floor, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"But training accounts for little compared to actual experience." Suneater said. "I can see that you intend to fight to the death."

Jack spit out some blood on the stone.

“You take hits better than most. I like that.”

Suneater’s teeth widened into a smile.

“We are the same, Jack!”

They clashed again, their mighty punches meeting each other mid swing. Suneater’s knuckles reddened as they struck Jack’s hand, but he was unperturbed as he tried to break through Jack’s defenses and attack his human flesh. Strike after strike he made, that Jack managed to barely counter. They exchanged several blows in a matter of seconds, striking like lightning and vanishing just as quickly.

It was not until Jack’s eye fell on the dripping water overhead that he gave a small pause, which gave his opponent the opening he needed to send him sprawling.

Jack did not get up right away as Kojack descended on him. His attention was turned to the ceiling. Little droplets of water were falling down on them from above, rather like raindrops. Perhaps if it was only in one spot, it would not concern him. But they were everywhere.

Kojack Fenrir’s ferocious blow knocked him back into the fight. He growled and jabbed up at him, trying to catch him unawares. Fenrir avoided the blow and counterattacked, sending Jack’s head slamming into the stone.

Fenrir raised his hand for another punch, but stopped. A steady trickle of water was falling onto his head. He stood up and allowed Jack to his feet, and they stared upward at the ceiling.

Everywhere along the wall water was falling with an increasing frequency.

“This castle is cursed.” Fenrir said. “It wants the victor to conquer it, as well as his enemy.”

True to his word, the stone seemed to burst open. Torrents of water poured down into the room around them, sloshing around their feet and ankles.

“To the tallest tower.” Fenrir said. “We fight as we go.”

He raised his hands and faced Jack, but found himself backing up, as quickly as he was able, to the stairs. Jack narrowed his eyes and leapt forward, swinging at him with a powerful punch.

Fenrir blocked the punch with his arm, but stepped further away. Sensing an opportunity, Jack changed his position to corner him against the wall. Fenrir backed into the wall rather than the stairs, glanced backwards to re-evaluate his position, as Jack landed a punch across his face.

“Arrrrgh!” Fenrir growled, as he reeled back. He grimaced, his face twisting into a snarl, as his eyes glinted with a bestial glow. He leaned forward, and to Jack’s very great surprise, bit his neck.

The pain was far more excruciating than he had ever could have expected. Rather than simply feeling pain in that one spot, Jack felt an intense wave of agony run through his entire body. His arms fell at his sides and he went limp.

The water crashed around them at an even more intense frequency. Kojack punched his stomach, and with no ability to block or take the blow Jack took the hit full force. He leaned forward, spitting out blood, as he fell to his knees, and then fell face first into the water.

It was deep enough that he couldn’t breathe in this position. He lay there, his body feeling oddly numb, as Kojack pressed his foot down on the back of his head.

Jack struggled to breath as he flailed about, trying to get a hold of Kojack or flip himself over. But Kojack was too strong, and the water falling around them was getting deeper and deeper.

Jack screamed, raised his hand, and brought the closed fist down onto the floor.

The floor shattered. Jack and Kojack fell through the hole it created, and the water that had been filling up the room followed suit. There was so much of it now that they were swept away from each other into opposite sides of the room.

Jack surfaced and took in a deep breath of air. He tried to gather himself as Fenrir tried to get back on his feet. The waves of water coming down right on top of them made it somewhat difficult, but eventually the fountain split into a sphere. The torrent of water came from the faucet, but rather than fall onto the floor as water normally would, it surrounded the two of them entirely, leaving a little bubble of air for the two of them to fight.

"Huh." Fenrir said, as he stared up at the water, seemingly perplexed. "This castle is full of surprises."

He turned his head back down at Jack, who was not getting back to his feet.

"The Master of this Castle." Fenrir said. "Was a vampire of great power and beauty. They say she could kill a man simply by looking his way, with only her eyes."

"Sounds like my kind of girl."

Fenrir grinned.

"This castle is an architecture of chaos." He said. "Doors will appear out of thin air leading to rooms that never existed, furniture will catch on fire… even the maids are dangerous."

He took a fighting position.

"Only the strongest could hope to rule this castle." He said.

"I'm not here for the Castle.' Jack rasped. "I'm here for you."

Kojack laughed.

He leapt back into the sphere of water. Jack stepped forward and watched as Fenrir swam, with surprising speed, in a circle around him. He moved faster and faster, so fast that the sphere of water began to circle around him, like it would if it were spiraling down a drain.

And then he leapt out of the water and struck at Jack. Jack quickly raised his guard, but it was a feint. Fenrir ducked, and leapt past him, back into the water.

He began to swim around in circles again, so quickly that Jack could not make him out. And again he struck. This time Jack went in for a counter punch, but Fenrir avoided the blow and smashed his chin with his own.

Jack reeled back, and his head entered the sphere of water behind him. He gagged as he pulled his head back, only to be hit again by Fenrir, this time in the stomach. He bent over as Fenrir went in for a combo, bludgeoning Jack's face with his fists.

Jack fell back into the water and spun around, trying to get his bearings as Fenrir leapt in after him. Jack was not able to bring up his hands to defend himself as Fenrir wrapped his hands around his throat. Jack gargled as Fenrir throttled him, shaking him violently.

(I have the advantage underwater)

Jack brought his hand up and protruded his clawed fingers outward. He jabbed forward, his clawed hand easily penetrating his shoulder. Fenrir screamed as Jack tore into his muscle, and with one ferocious yank, tore the arm open at the shoulder.

Fenrir backed away, falling out of the sphere of water and roaring with pain. Jack leapt after him, his teeth bared, as they hit the ground. Fenrir stumbled, unable to regain his balance without his arm, but Jack landed on his feet.

In several quick motions, he threw slashed his claws at the downed werewolf. Fenrir screamed in pain as the claws tore into his chest, his neck, and his wounded shoulder.

The scream of pain turned into a Howl, and Jack braced himself as the sheer power of his voice reverberated through his ears. This time, however, Fenrir could not muster up the energy to make Jack flinch as he had before. Jack continued his assault, ignoring Fenrir's cries.

And then, he lay still. Jack stood over his fallen enemy, feeling a strong sense of disappointment.

"The last fight was better." He said.

Fenrir chuckled.

He sat up, rubbing his face and neck as he stared up at Jack.

“I have to admit, kid.” He said. “You’re something else.”

The numerous cuts on his body were already starting to close. The shoulder that Jack had almost torn off was beginning to regenerate.

“Werewolves aren’t easy to kill.” Fenrir said, as he got to his feet. “Even for someone like you.”

Jack glared at him. “Next time, I won’t stop.”

“There won’t be a next time.” Fenrir said. “I will not fall to you.”

He raised his arms and crossed them into an X shape. He stared at Jack, and then uncrossed them.

A great, magical force exploded outward from him. The stone walls burst open and the water poured out of the castle and towards the ground below. Jack dug his heels into the ground and slid backward, grunting with pain.

“Catch me if you can!”

Fenrir leapt out of the hole in the wall and scampered across the side of the stone wall. His strong, powerful hands found handholds along the wall, and he hoisted himself up the outside of the castle. Jack grimaced, and followed suit.

“No you don’t!”

He took his claws and embedded them into the side of the stone, tearing through them like paper. He scampered up after Fenrir, and due to not needing to find handholds he quickly managed to catch up to him.

“Rar!”

Jack leapt forward and took a swipe at Fenrir’s leg, slashing it with his claws. He missed, and briefly lost his balance. He spun around in midair and tried to re=orient himself as Fenrir drop kicked him from above.

Jack cried out as Fenrir's foot connected to the back of his head. He went spinning through the air, and barely managed to avoid his head smashing onto the stone battlement below by landing on his shoulder instead.

Jack cried out in pain, and rolled out of the way as Fenrir fell down on top of him. Fenrir kicked out at him as Jack rolled, sweeping his leg to try and knock Fenrir off balance. Fenrir leapt up top of the side of the wall, and Jack quickly regained his own footing.

They stood, precariously balanced on top of the battlements, facing each other. And then Jack swiped forward with his claw. Fenrir ducked, and kicked at his legs. Jack leapt upward and spun, knocking into Fenrir's head. He stumbled, his feet barely managing to maintain their balance, as Jack landed and struck again with another kick. Fenrir ducked down, lunged forward, and kicked at Jack's standing leg.

Jack crumpled. He fell off the battlements and spun around in mid-air. The rocks below lay waiting as he stuck out his claws and fixed them into the stone wall, stopping his descent.

But before he could climb back up Fenrir was there. He leapt down the Battlements, got in between them, and began furiously kicking at Jack's face. Jack grimaced with each as each to his face.

He shifted the position of his claws, and ripped upward, taking out the stone that Fenrir was standing on. Surprised, Fenrir began to fall. Jack took his free hand, grabbed his leg, and then swung him down, sending him crashing to the rocks below.

CRACK!

He fell on his head and rolled, hitting rock after rock as he slid down the remainder of the cliff and down to the beach.

Jack remembered what had happened last time: He did not repeat his mistake. He leapt down from the top of the battlements to the beach below. Wind whipped his face and hair as he landed directly on Fenrir's stomach.

SPLAT. The blow was so powerful that Jack's foot went right through it. Jack grimaced as he raised his claws and tore at Fenrir's face, tearing apart his skin, his skull, his neck.

Fenrir wasn't moving.

Jack stopped mid motion as he stared at his still lifeless body. He stared for quite a while, before stepping away.

"That's it?" Jack asked, his voice cold. "This is all the power that the legendary Fenrir Suneater possesses?"

Fenrir chuckled. Blood fell out of his mouth.

"You have pushed my human form to its limit, Dragon." He rasped. "But it is only my human form."

"I'm not waiting for the Full Moon for a rematch, jackass." Jack said. "I'm going to go home and bang my girlfriend."

Black smoke was beginning to rise out of Fenrir's mouth. It wafted to the sky, soaring high into the clouds. The sun was beginning to rise in the distance.

"My dream." Fenrir said. "Was to become the strongest man in the world."

The black smoke rose further and further into the sky. It swelled and grew, and became an impenetrable black. It cast a dark shadow over the beach.

He opened what remained of his mouth and a bright white light shot out of it. Jack watched as it rose high into the sky and exploded, forming the image of the full moon.

Fenrir began to writhe on the ground. The skin on his body that Jack had ripped off with his claws began to sew itself back together, and thick black hair protruded out from his skin.

The transformation was a lot quicker than he expected. Jack watched as the broken bones elongated and changed shape. The jaw became longer and more powerful, and the eyes glinted with a dangerous fury.

The creature bent its neck over and snarled. A dark, dangerous aura filled the air. The air was thick with tension.

"What is this feeling…?" Jack wondered. "Am I…. happy?"

The werewolf raised itself to its full height and stared at him. It bared its long fangs at him and howled.

The sand around them billowed up from the sheer force of the sound and surrounded him completely. He coughed, waving his hand in front of his face as the cloud of sand blew into dust.

Jack braced himself, and the werewolf came tearing through the dust. With one powerful blow, it caught Jack in the face, and sent him flying through the air. He went crashing up back up to the castle where he came, slamming into the battlements which shattered into pieces, and then past them into the castle itself.

He smashed past the wall of the castle as well and rolled into the room. His eyes darted immediately back to the hole his body had created, as the werewolf leapt onto the hole in the wall, peering through it at him. It glared at him through the hole in the castle as he staggered to his feet.

"Not bad." Jack told it, grimacing. "I've never been hit that hard in my life."

The wolf entered the castle, and in the dark of the room nothing could be seen other than its glowing eyes. Its long, powerful limbs reached through the hole in the wall to try and get at Jack.

Jack reached out his claw towards it and grabbed hold. He squeezed the arm, pressing his claws deeply into the muscle. The wolf screamed, and yanked its arm back, taking Jack with it.

It held jack over the side of the castle and stared at him. Jack punched it in the face, and it barely flinched. The animal raised its arm, and with a great shake, sent Jack flying back down the castle wall, once again slamming into the castle. He broke through the roof and crashed down into a kitchen.

The Vampire Maid wiping down the counter didn't even glance up as she washed the dishes from last night's dinner. Jack groaned as he sat up, rubbing his head.

"Mind the kitchen." The maid told him dryly, as she set the plate she had been cleaning on the rack to her side. "Those countertops have stayed intact for hundreds of years."

Jack got up and brushed himself off.

"Can I have some ice cream after I win?"

The Maid cast him a glance. "If you win."

"It's not a matter of If." Jack said as he made his way to the door. "I want Vanilla mixed with sprinkles."

"Noted." The white haired maid said dryly, as she adjusted her glasses. Jack grinned at her, winked, and then carefully stepped out of the kitchen.

He found himself back out into the dark, gloomy hallway. He could see the shadow of the werewolf darting through the stained glass windows, Clearly trying to hunt him down.

He stepped down the hallway and some stairs, trying to find his way back outside the castle. When he was about halfway down the hall, the glass window above him shattered and the werewolf came barreling through, snarling.

Jack whirled around, eyes narrowed, and unleashed a mighty blow. The wolf was caught square in the jaw, and it tumbled in midair, falling straight onto its back as it slid across the floor. Jack turned around to glare at it as it rolled over, snarled, and advanced towards him. The teeth were so long and numerous that it gave the beast wicked, grinning features.

Jack stepped forward and jabbed forward again. The wolf leapt forward, and this time, although Jack's blow connected, the beast did not even flinch. It went for his neck, snarling, intent on ripping him to shreds.

Jack raised his arm and placed it in his mouth. The werewolf bit down on the impenetrable scales of the dragon, and squeezed. The scale of the dragon were so incredibly durable, that the teeth themselves shattered in his mouth.

Jack rolled over and slammed his other hand against the werewolf's head. This time it was in so much pain that it wasn't able to simply take the blow, and went sprawling. Teeth went flying out of his mouth as it rolled over.

Jack quickly tried making his way over to it, but before he could the beast was on its feet again, snarling, and brought itself up to its full height. It seemed equally comfortable running around on four legs and standing on two. it stared down at Jack from glared. Jack raised his fists and jabbed.

The blow would have broken through stone walls or penetrated a normal man, but the wolf only stood there and took it. Jack frowned, as he looked back up at the wolf. It smiled at him. The teeth that had been knocked out were already regrowing.

Jack tried to punch it in the jaw again, but this time it struck first, catching him in the chest with its own fist. Jack went flying backward, slamming into the wall at the end of the hallway.

Jack grimaced as he stepped away from the wall and brushed off the dust that had gotten onto his shirt. The werewolf stood at the end of the hallway, standing completely still.

"If you think I'm just going to lay down and die, you're wrong." Jack said. "You-"

What he was exactly neither of them either found out.

Jack had no time to dodge. The werewolf uppercut him and sent him flying upward, crashing through the roof of the ceiling and into the sky.

Jack spun through the air, trying to get his bearings as his ascent slowed to a crawl. When he came to a stop, the wolf was there, right next to him in midair. Jack caught a glimpse of its wide,

sickening grin, as it grabbed hold of him and threw him back down at full force.

Jack swung wildly, slashing across the wolf's chest with his claws as he shot back down to earth. He braced himself for the impact, and slammed back into the castle at full force. Again he shattered the stone and landed back in the hallway. Dust and debris surrounded him as he lay there, his head spinning.

He couldn't take much more of this.

The werewolf landed next to him, surprisingly gently, and nosed him with mouth.

"Up." The wolf rasped. "Is this all the power you possess?"

He pushed Jack over so that he was sitting flat on his back.

"Is this the strength of the man who forced me to transform?"

Jack coughed. Blood seeped out threw his mouth. He was sure that he was dying.

"Pity." The wolf said. "I thought you would push me to my limit."

Jack chuckled.

The wolf bent its head down at him and stared.

"You haven't killed me yet." Jack rasped. "Because you're not strong enough."

The wolf stood there, taken aback as Jack staggered to his fight, breathing heavily.

"Do you know why I haven't died yet?" Jack asked. "Dragons can take a beating. If you want to win, you'll have to give it everything you've got."

The werewolf lunged at him again, this time with its mouth. Jack raised his arm and shoved it down his throat. The werewolf gagged as it raised its arms to grab Jack.

"Not." Jack said, as he opened his hand and raked it along the inside of the wolf's mouth.

“Strong.’ He inserted his other arm into his mouth.

“ENOUGH!”

He took both of his hands and brought them apart with a ferocious tug. The werewolf split in half from the jaw downward. Its bone and skin ripped in two as Jack stood there in the hallway, the two halves of the wolf gripped tightly in his claws. Jack stared up at the hole in the ceiling, both halves of the wolf gripped tightly in his claws.

“Is this really how I win?” He asked himself. “Against such an opponent?”

The two halves in his hands began to writhe in his grasp. Jack continued to stare upwards, deep in contemplation as the claws swung up at his face.

Jack tilted his head backward and glanced down, carelessly, at the werewolf that had just been split in two.

“You can’t kill me, Jack.” The thing said. Unable to speak with its mouth, it seemed to be speaking directly into his mind. “You aren’t strong enough.”

The two halves gave a jerk, and suddenly muscles and bone began to sprout out from the bottom on up, connecting the two halves together. Jack threw the jaw of the werewolf on the ground and backed away, as the bones of its jaw snapped back into place.

The wolf began to laugh. Jack stared up at it. He could see the full moon shining down from above.

His eyes narrowed. He clenched his fist and swung. He caught the wolf square in the jaw. The laughter turned into a shriek of shock and rage as the head was blown straight off its shoulders. It soared through the hole in the ceiling and into the glowing moon.

It exploded into a shower of sparks. The wolf’s body shuddered wildly as its shape began to slowly shrink and weaken. Jack lowered his clenched fist and stared down at the body.

KOJACK FENRIR

DEAD

Jack turned around and shook his head. He grimaced, staggering slightly.

“Nice fight, master.” A smooth voice said from above him.

Jack looked up. Sitting on the windowsill above him was a vampire. A tall, elegant blonde, she sat with her legs crossed, staring down at him through a single eye.

“Who the hell are you?” Jack asked.

The woman bowed her head.

“I am Kirumi Kiryu.” She said. “I am one of the twelve maids of this castle.”

She leapt down from the ledge in which she was sitting and gracefully floated down to the floor in front of him. She bowed to him.

“Welcome to your Castle, Master.”

Jack looked down at her as she raised her head, and smiled faintly. She was the sort of woman who clearly did not smile often.

“It will be my pleasure to serve you.”

Jack gestured to the body of the werewolf.

“I thought he was your Master.”

“He was.” She said. “But now that you have defeated him, this estate belongs to you. Until you yourself are defeated in battle. I, and my companions, are duty bound to serve you-“

“Do you know where Sophie is?”

“The girl you arrived with is resting.” She said. “She barricaded herself in a room and said that she wouldn’t let any of us near her.” She sounded more amused than condescending.

“Let her know that I’ve won.” Jack said. “And that we’re leaving.”

“Leaving?” The maid inquired. “For what purpose?”

Jack flashed her a smile.

“For the next battle.”

The woman looked taken aback for a moment, and then she smiled.

"I think we will get along famously, Master."

…

8 More To Kill

The White Plague

Norway

"Norway?"

Jack frowned. "I'm not going to have to kill the Grand High Witch, am I?"

"No, of course not." Sophie said, scowling. "Mother would never allow it." She stopped, the wheels in her head turning. "What do you know about Norway?"

"I know that Soren came from there."

"Norway is an interesting country." Sophie said. "The first witches came from there, and the region is still very has roots with that culture. The Hellraiser Witches consider this their ancestral land, and a large portion of the human population still considers it their duty to hunt down and exterminate them."

"What does this have to do with my next fight?"

Sophie grimaced.

"I'm getting to that." She said. She reached for her dossier and pulled out a photograph.

"You're fighting the White Plague."

"The… what?"

Sophie cast him an exasperated glance.

"Have you never heard of her?"

"Her?"

Sophie tilted her hand to show him the photograph. It was the image of an old woman holding a single rat.

“When she was young she was a very successful Witch Hunter from the region.” Sophie said. “She aged, had children, and then grandchildren, and then retired. But her enemies among the Hellraisers destroyed her life in retirement. And now she wants revenge.”

“Uhhh… aren’t the Hellraisers our enemies too?”

“They are.” Sophie agreed, as she put the photo away. “But the White Plague is dangerous. She’s resorted to using disease to attempt to eradicate witches from the region, and a lot of them have trickled into other communities, including human ones. She no longer cares about the consequences for her actions: the extermination of witch culture matters more to her than the continued prosperity of humanity.”

Sophie grimaced.

“That is, by the by, exactly what the Hellraisers want.” She said. “To destroy as many human lives as possible. Her agenda to destroy them all is leading her to play right into their hands.”

The White Plague lived out in the middle of rural Norway… farther from civilization than any on his List so far. First they had flown into the country, then had been driven by car, then by snowmobile, and soon they were sitting in a rather plain cabin, covered by snow. Sophie, due to her survival training, had been easily able to light a fire that enveloped the entire room in a warm glow. The two of them sat across from one another.

“Many homes in this area are empty.” She said. “Anyone who tries to move in quickly gets sick and dies.”

“Everyone except us, you mean.”

“She spreads the disease through rats.” She said. “By keeping this place clean from droppings and such, we should be fine. Just try and not to get bitten.”

“I’m a dragon, surely I can’t get sick from that kind of thing?”

“You can, actually.” Sophie said. “So be careful.”

It was not long until Jack left Sophie in the warm, comfortable cabin and found himself in the middle of an intense blizzard. Unsure of whether it was a natural storm or a result of witchcraft, he plowed ahead, covered head to toe in thick winter clothing.

There was nothing but ice, snow, and trees. He trudged along, not uncomfortably, but growing increasingly bored, through the woods, wondering what exactly he was looking for.

He passed by a number of empty homes, all completely covered in snow, before he could see smoke puffing from a chimney in the distance. He made his way through the trees and found himself in front of a home. The snow surrounding him gave way to a bright green field and cobblestone path that led up to a cozy looking cottage.

Jack paid no heed to the sudden shift: he stepped onto the grass, and shook off the snow from his coat. The bright sunlight was so harsh that he almost felt the need to remove the coat entirely. But to do so would cost him valuable time.

He walked up the road up to the cottage and raised his hand. He knocked on the door.

"Yes?" The warm, friendly voice of an older woman greeted him.

"I'm here to kill you."

There was silence on the other side of the door.

"Well, you're not a Witch." She said at last. And the door sprung open.

Jack stepped inside the room and adjusted the sleeves on his jacket. The home seemed even smaller and cozier than it had looked on the outside: A warm fire emanated a soft light into the room, and a woman sat rocking back and forth in the rocking chair facing it.

She raised a hand towards him.

"Have a seat."

She gestured to the chair next to her.

Jack remained standing.

“Maybe you didn’t hear me.” He said. “I’m here to kill you.”

“Humor an old lady at the end of her life.” The woman said.

Jack opened his mouth to argue further, but closed it again. It wasn’t all that unreasonable of a request, now that he thought of it. He moved next to the chair and sat down across from her.

“Would you like anything to drink?”

“I’d be a fool to take anything from you.”

The woman clicked her tongue. “Understandable. But a pity.” She stared at him. Her face was more wrinkled than any he had ever seen. “Who sent you?” She asked. “Surely not the Grand High Witch.”

“The Order of the Dragon.” He said. “Lucille Langley.”

“Ah.” She said. “I see.”

Jack heard a small scurrying to his right. He turned and watched as a number of rats, dressed in rather fine looking silver tunics, scurried under his feet, holding aloft a giant teapot.

One of the rats scurried on ahead, string in tow, and leapt upward, seemingly flying through the sky like a bird. The string grew tight as the rat landed on the rafters above him, and then swung back down.

The other rats released the teapot, and it began to rise, perfectly steady, and then came to a stop next to the table. A leapt up onto the teapot and weighed it down, causing it to tip over and pour into her mug.

“Woah!” Jack said, impressed, as the rats moved away. “You’ve trained them to do that?”

The old woman gave him a crinkly smile. “In a way.” She said. “They trained me. You never stop learning, you know. No matter how old you get or how many of your loved ones you lose.”

Jack looked up at her.

“If you think being kind to me is going to stop me, you are much mistaken.” He said. “I wasn’t joking.”

“I know you weren’t.” The old lady said heavily. “Why else would a man like you come to see me? But boy…” She leaned in closer to him. “It doesn’t need to be this way.”

Jack sat silently, watching her.

“I understand that this region is becoming uninhabitable to people.” She said. “And my heart aches every day. But I cannot stop. I will not stop. Until each and every witch is dead.”

She looked at him.

“Surely you, as a Knight of the Order of the Dragon, can understand that?”

Jack smirked.

“I only fight the strong.”

She stared at him, her lips pursed.

“I don’t care what you’re trying to do here.” He said. “I don’t care about you, or these people. All I want is to tear you to bits.”

The witch sighed.

“You’re looking at the greatest witch hunter in the world.” She said. “I have saved countless lives. And yet you speak of killing me as if it brings you nothing but pleasure.”

All around them a number of rats stood on their hind legs, as if standing at attention.

“It’s really nothing personal.” Jack said, as he got to his feet. “Can you still fight at your age, Grandma?”

The fire next to them sparked to life. The old woman’s eyes glinted.

“Can you?”

Jack laughed as the flames enveloped him completely. The warm, pleasurable flame would have likely deeply scarred a normal man

with severe burns, but when the flames subsided Jack was completely unscratched. But the woman was gone.

In her place stood rats. They were everywhere. On the chairs, on the mantelpiece above the fireplace, on the little table, on the rafters above him. They were dressed in rather sturdy looking tunics that had armor plating under them, and carried swords. Dozens of beady little eyes stared stared down at him with nothing but contempt.

“Where’d she go?” Jack asked them. “I’m not interested in you.”

The rats leapt at him. Teeth and tiny blades of steel descended on him, from all directions. Jack let out a powerful scream, and his aura exploded into a mass of energy, engulfing the entire home.

The entire building tore into pieces. The rats were flung backward by the sheer force of his energy. A number of them slid against the field, and others flew so far that they landed into the snow outside of the property.

Jack stood over the wreckage of the home, looking around for his enemy.

“I’m not interested in fighting rats.” He rasped. The aura explosion was so massive that he had to stop and recover his energy.

One of the rats popped its head up out of the snow and bared its teeth at him. Many of the others followed suit.

“You wish to fight me?” Jack asked. “For what reason?”

Three rats scampered across the field towards him. One leapt up and clung onto his coat and, with a mighty stab, made to impale his stomach. Jack reached down and ripped it off, and threw it violently into the ruins. It slammed into the wood and bounced, falling to the ground in a heap.

The other rats leapt up at him, and they seemed to almost fly through the air towards him. Jack stepped back, raising his claws, swatting aside their attempts at cutting into his skin. With each block, he would swat the animals out of the air, sending them flying.

They fought rather like wasps: darting in and around him at a variety of angles, trying to find an opening. Jack effortlessly ducked and weaved throughout all of their strikes.

When one leapt up from behind him and spun his sword around in a whirling arc, Jack whirled around and headbutted it. The rat let out a cry, reached out a paw, and grabbed hold of his head.

Jack whirled back around to the many other rats as the one brave outlier clung tightly for dear life on top of his head, swinging around by strands of hair. Three more rats leapt upwards at him, and he had to deflect their attacks, momentarily forgetting about the creature in his hair.

The rat raised its sword, and impaled Jack through the head. Blood spurted out as the blade stabbed into his skull.

Jack flinched, realizing his mistake a little bit too late as blood shot out from his head and fell across his eyes. The rat pressed all of his might into the blade, trying his hardest to drive it entirely through the skull and into the brain.

Jack unleashed another aura explosion, and the rats around him flew away from him, but the one on his head gripped tightly onto his sword and bared his fangs, desperately trying to hold his ground.

Jack grimaced. He reached up to his head, grabbed the rat, and crushed it in his hand.

The broken corpse of the animal fell from his grip and onto the ground below. Jack let out a deep intake of air, and fell to his knees. One aura explosion was exhausting, but using another back to back was downright debilitating.

This time the rats recovered much more quickly; they whirled around in midair and, in one smooth motion, were flying back towards him. They raised their swords and charged.

Jack raised his arms to protect his face and chest with his claws, but the rats, with machine like precision, ducked past his guard and slashed at his upper arms, cutting deeply into his skin.

Jack gasped, as his arms hung limply at his sides. It only took him a split second to realize what had just happened. They had managed to cut the tendons in his arms.

The rats spun around again, this time headed straight for his legs. Jack grimaced, and bent his head downward, snatching a rat into his teeth.

The rat squirmed and fought as Jack used the power in his jaws to crunch through its flesh and bone. He spat the head out onto the ground, and it rolled.

One of the rats let out a shriek of rage and flung itself back at him, ahead of the others. Jack grinned, egging the rat on, as it tried to dive in between his legs and slashing at his ankle. In one fluid movement, Jack raised his leg and stomped down on it, crushing it under his foot.

The remaining rats rallied, and again moved to strike, but this time they were much fewer in number. Their formation, which must have been carefully constructed through years of practice, had been broken. Even without his arms Jack found it easy to deal with them. He whirled his leg around in a sort of circular kick that caught most of them and sent them flying. The others, due to his sudden movement, failed to hit his vital points. They either merely scratched him or missed him entirely.

Jack had to align his upper body at a weird angle to maintain his balance, due to being unable to use his arms. He tottered rather oddly on one leg, trying to get used to the sensation as his arms hung limply at his sides. The remaining rats, those that had not been taken out by his kick at any rate, were already swinging back around for another attack.

Jack grimaced, and kicked forward.

One rat was kicked so hard that its head exploded.

Jack pulled back his leg and kicked again.

Another rat managed to avoid the blow, but was knocked off balance: he careened into the ground, dazed.

Jack pulled his leg back again and went in for another kick.

The final rat took the blow head on, but was able to stop the force of it shattering its body by adjusting his position to take the blow. He went flying backward, into the ruins of the home, and found himself impaled on the splinters of the broken chair. It writhed in pain, and then fell silent.

The remaining rats seemed wary now. They stood tall, and stood their ground, but they no longer attacked. Jack grinned.

"Is this the power of the White Plague?" He asked. "You cannot hope to destroy me with such simple tactics.

"You have already lost."

Jack looked up. Snow was beginning to fall on the ground around them. The rats, as if by instinct, immediately adjusted the tunics so that they would more tightly protect against the change in the elements.

"I have lost?" Jack asked blankly.

"The Plague is now within you." The voice answered. "The blood that you consumed when you bit down on my beloved grandchild…. It is a disease that even a Dragon cannot overpower. You will gradually weaken, and then die. Without I even needing to lift a finger."

The surviving rats, again as if following some unseen order, scattered. They dove into the snow and vanished out of sight. Jack stared up at the sky.

"What is this?" He asked. "Do you not wish to fight me?"

"I do not." The voice answered. "You are nothing but a bloodthirsty beast. I have chosen to kill you only to defend myself, nothing more. Killing you gives me no pleasure. Please forgive me."

Jack grimaced. He fought through the pain in his arm to clench his head into his fist.

"I don't care about whether or not I die." He said. "I just want to fight you."

The voice did not answer. Jack pressed onward.

“I will not succumb to your illness.” He said. “I will destroy you.”

The voice answered.

“You are already dead.”

And then the snow stopped.

Jack stood staring up at the sky, as if expecting the voice to emphasize her point further. The anger in him was boiling.

“This isn’t the end!” Jack screamed. He coughed, raising his hand to his mouth. He looked down at it, and saw that he had just spit up blood.

The shock brought him back to reality. His head was beginning to spin, and he staggered. He blinked rapidly, trying to stop the sensation welling up within him. He felt nauseous as his knees hit the ground. The snow was still falling around him.

This wasn’t how it was going to end. It wasn’t. He mustered up all his energy and staggered back to his feet. His arms still hung limply at his sides. He wasn’t sure where he was going to end up, but he wasn’t going to die.

He felt his throat contract and he coughed again. More blood came out of his mouth, and he once more collapsed. This time face first onto the ground.

He wasn’t going to die here. He rolled over onto his back and tried moving his arms. They still wouldn’t budge.

It then struck him.

“You don’t want me to die.”

The snow all of a sudden stopped falling. Jack struggled and sat up. Blood was still trickling out of his mouth.

“You’re trying to get me to run away.” Jack said. “You could have killed me at any point back there, but you chose to do nothing.”

The snow started falling again.

“You are already dead.” The voice said. “No matter what I do.”

“Pah.” Jack spit the blood out of his mouth. “You’re only interested in killing witches. You know that I’m better use to you alive.”

The snow stopped falling.

“Tell you what.” Jack said. “Fight me, and if I win I promise I’ll kill as many witches as I can handle.”

The response was gentle.

“You cannot.”

“You doubt my power?”

“I have dedicated my entire life to destroying witches.” She said. “And I… have not even come close to eliminating them.”

“Maybe you don’t have to.”

The snow began to fall faster.

“I must.” The voice said. “Nothing is more important!”

The speed and ferocity of the snow seemed to increase. Jack smiled. He could no longer see a thing.

He could hear a voice calling his name through the snow.

“Jack? Jack? Jack!”

Everything went dark.

…

He awoke to find warm liquid being poured into his mouth. He let out an audible groan as he shifted about in his sheets.

“Finally awake, are you?” Sophie asked disparagingly, as she lowered the thermos to her side. “You’ve been out for three weeks.”

“T-three… weeks?” He rasped.

“Yes.” She said. “On top of your sickness… which I explicitly warned you about, by the way… you were nearly frozen, with nearly severed limbs.”

“Damage?”

“Not too bad.” Sophie said. “Nothing I couldn’t fix.” She seemed pleased with herself. Jack tried to sit up, but her face instantly became stern.

“No.” She said, as she pushed him back down. “You can’t move until your better. Doctor’s orders.”

Jack glared up at her. “You’re not a doctor.”

“Well, maybe I will be, someday.” Sophie said. “My parents are.”

“Yeah, of Dracology. You’re a brat with an attitude problem.”

“Don’t talk down to the woman taking care of you.” She said, flaring up at once.

“The little kid taking care of me, you mean?” Jack asked, as he stared up at the ceiling. “Couldn’t someone from the Order have come and helped?”

“Hm.” Sophie sniffed. “I had the situation well in hand. It’s amazing that you weren’t killed.”

Jack leaned his head back on the pillow.

“Not really.” Jack said, his voice quiet. “She didn’t want to fight.”

“Want to fight?” Sophie asked sharply. “She almost killed you.”

“Nah.” Jack said, his exhaustion taking hold of him again. “I just… made her do it.”

He was asleep before he could elaborate. Sophie stared at him, exasperated, and then began to wipe his head down with the cloth.

She had just dipped it back into her bowl of water to wet it again when she caught sight of a pair of beady black eyes staring at her. She screamed and knocked the bowl over, spilling it onto the wooden floor.

The rat stood up on its hind legs.

“Greetings.” The animal said politely. “You are Sophie Langley of the Order of the Dragon, are you not?”

She lowered her hands from her mouth and stared.

“Y-yes.”

“I have come to inform you that you may leave our territory. You are not in any danger, and will not come to harm if you leave immediately.”

“Leave?” Sophie repeated, a little taken aback. “Why would I leave? Jack hasn’t done what he was sent here to do.”

The rat cocked its head, considering her.

“And what has he been sent here to do?”

“To kill the creator of the Plague, of course.”

The rat stared at her.

“Are you a witch?”

It sounded like an honest question.

“I’m a Knight of the Oder of the Dragon.” Sophie said. “I’m here to protect people.”

“But grandmama is killing witches.” The rat said. “That’s good, isn’t it?”

“Not if you kill others by mistake.”

“But we don’t kill by mistake.” The rat said. “All those we target are guilty of witchcraft. Please do not think of us stupid animals.”

“You’re well spoken, for a rat.” Sophie said. “But your targets aren’t the only victims.”

“Those who live here and do nothing about witches are just as guilty of witchcraft.” The rat said. It drew its sword. “If you do not retreat, I will be forced to take drastic measures.”

“You’re a rat.” Sophie said, impatiently. “What can you do?”

The rat leapt upward. It spun in the air and dove down on her head. Sophie raised her hand upward, the rat slammed into the ceiling. She brought it back down, and it slammed into the floor. She raised her foot and stepped on him, pinning him down.

“I am a Knight of the Dragon.” Sophie said, her voice cold. “You would do well not to underestimate me.”

The rat adjusted its head, trying desperately to bite through her boot, but she brought her leg back and kicked him, sending him sliding across the floor. He slammed into the wall of the cabin with a thud. He staggered to his feet, seemingly winded. Sophie watched it warily. Finally it shook her head and bared its teeth at her.

“I will remember this, warrior.” It said. It leapt to the side, climbed up a nearby table, scaled the drapes, and was running along the beams on the ceiling in seconds. And then it was gone.

Sophie looked back to Jack and sighed, shaking her head. “You better get back on your feet soon.” She said. “That won’t be the last of them.”

She was quite right. As she attended to his needs, washing his face and keeping him hydrated, she caught sight of beady little eyes watching her from the afar. Whether through a window or on top of the rafters. Several pairs of eyes were on here all at once.

She dared not leave Jack alone for any period of time. She sat up in her room for three days without sleep, procuring water for Jack through magic. She ate nothing, out of fear that the rats may have gotten into her supplies and infected it with their strange disease. Her eyes were red and bleary as she leaned over Jack. Wishing… desperately… that he would wake up.

From behind her the sound of a leaping rat hit her ears. She whirled around, eyes wide, and exerted Force with her magic. The rat, which seemed to be holding a small sword, was thrown backward. The small blade went falling to the ground.

Other rats leapt forward. Sophie had no idea where they all came from. But they descended on them from all directions. Several went for her, but a lot of them went for Jack.

“No!”

She took the jug of water she had lying by his bedside and threw it over him. She stretched her fingers and the entire thing spread over

Jack like a blanket. She closed them, and it froze over, covering him completely from the onslaught. The rats slammed onto the ice with force, leaving cracks.

Before she could fix them, however, the three rats that had dove at her grabbed hold of her hair, her neck, and her chest. She whirled around furiously, sending one of them flying. The one on her chest, clung tightly onto her jacket. The one in her hair clutched its little claws onto her scalp.

She felt a brief surge of panic: She could get infected. She reached for her little knife and raised it to her head without a second thought. The sharpened blade razed through her hair and impaled the beast where it stood.

She ripped it off, flung the body across the room, and again jabbed the knife at the second rat. It tried escaping, by letting go of her jacket, but it was too caught. She skewered it in mid-air, killing it instantly.

The ones that had bounced off the ice were busy chipping away at it with their weapons. Already the cracks had become more pronounced and seemed almost as if they would shatter. Sophie flicked her hand again, and the ice unfroze instantly, and surrounded the rats instead of Jack. In moments they were all completely frozen.

She wasted no time. She washed out her head injury with water, hoping that she hadn't gotten infected, and then checked Jack. She was relieved to see that he was not in any way injured.

She was busy finishing up her check up when it suddenly dawned on her how tired she was. The fight hadn't been much for her, but going so long without food and sleep was beginning to make her feel light headed. She couldn't go on like this.

She fought off the thought with a shake of her head and continued tending to Jack.

It wasn't long after that that more rats began to creep into the house. Sophie, more exhausted than ever, began to feel very much

aware that her senses were dimming. She had trained to endure long periods of exertion, but very much knew her own limits.

I won't succumb

I won't…

I…

Want…

She swallowed.

What I want doesn't matter.

She straightened her back and sat completely straight, her hands folded neatly in front of her. Her eyes were open, and her heart was hard.

I must complete my mission.

She honestly thought she had passed out when the comforting sound of a rocking chair moving back and forth hit her ears. She perked up her ears, frowned, and sat forward, staring at the closed door in front of them.

It opened of its own accord, and sitting on the other side of it was their target.

"Good evening." The old woman said pleasantly.

"Good evening." Sophie said automatically, without thinking. She blushed. Now was not the time to be the good polite girl next door. "It's a good day for you to die."

"No need to be that way, child." The woman said soothingly. "I will not hurt you."

She certainly did resemble the spitting image of a kindly grandmother. Sophie, not all that sentimental a person, was not taken in.

"Your rats might."
There was a rat sitting on the arm of her chair, right next to her hand. It raised itself up and bared its teeth at her.

“There is no need for that.” The woman said softly, as she stroked the rat’s fur with her finger. Instantly the creature settled down, its black eyes never leaving Sophie.

“My apologies.” The woman said. “My grandchildren see you as nothing more than a threat. No different than the witches they hunt down every day.”

“Your grandchildren?” Sophie repeated, puzzled.

“That’s right.” She said. She rocked back and forth. “Many years ago, my only grandson was transformed into a rat by a witch. We despaired… at first. The process was irreversible, and although he retained his human intelligence he was quite clearly never going to live a normal life.”

She stroked the back of the rat at her side with her finger.

“But he surprised me.” She said. “He met other rats, and had children. Children who retained his good heart, his strength of will, and his desire to do good.”

She smiled.

“And so we set out on our mission.” She said. “To eliminate the world’s witches.”

“At the expense of others?” Sophie responded, a little bit coldly. “The disease you spread has traveled far beyond that of the Witches you target.”

She stopped rocking.

“The disease.” She said. “Will spread among those who interact with witches.” The chair creaked as she stood up, and stepped to the door. She stood there in the doorway, so wide that her body blocked off any kind of escape.

“I have tried to be kind.” The woman said. “Because you made it clear to me that you understand the importance of the Hunt. The Order of the Dragon has a long history of hunting down and destroying witches, and I have nothing but respect for you for doing so. But it seems you do not feel the same way about me.”

“You’re killing innocent people.”

“I’m killing anyone who would consort with witches.” She responded. “People everywhere justify their association with them for all sorts of reason. It does not matter how many children they kill, or lives they ruin, or demons they bring into the world… it matters more that have a witch close by, if the need for her arises."

She threw her arms upward. Rats poured out of her thick jacket. From the arms, from the cuffs, from the neckline. They flooded into the room brandishing teeth and weapons.

Sophie screamed and backed away. She hurriedly brought her hand over the wooden desk she had been storing her equipment on and set it on fire with her powers. In other fluid movement she had grabbed the leg and swung it around in an arc, desperately trying to scare the animals away.

She had, perhaps, overestimated their fear of her. The few that were in the trajectory of her attack simply moved out of the way, darting under and around her attack. She hurriedly tried to stomp at those at her feet, but soon a number of them were crawling up her boot, and she shocked to see them attempt at nibbling through it.

There was no choice. She raised the desk high above her head and forced her power into the flames. It erupted into a vast, uncontrollable inferno. The ceiling and the walls around them were set ablaze. Soon the Witch, the rats, Jack, and Sophie herself were entirely covered by fire.

Sophie stood there, the flames licking at her body, as she stared intensely at the witch. She had not moved a muscle. In fact, it seemed almost as if…

“Raaaaah!”

She jumped. She whirled around to see Jack, still lying in bed, rip off of the bed knob and send it spinning through the air. She watched, enraptured, as the splintered piece of wood spun through the air and made contact with the head of the woman.

The splintered wood passed right through. Sophie stared. The image of the woman stood there for a little bit, and then vanished. The thick coat and fell to the ground.

"What… what's happened?"

Sophie almost forgot that she was standing in a blazing inferno, surrounded by the burnt corpses of dead rats. Her head was bent, deep in thought.

"What are we really fighting here…?" She asked, to no one in particular.

A hand clapped on her shoulder. She jumped.

"The enemy." Jack rasped. "Nothing more. Nothing less."

Sophie stared at him, and then nodded.

"Are you well?"

"No, but we can't stay here."

Sophie nodded. Jack wrapped his arm around her shoulders and she helped him out of the building. Any stray rat that survived the blast was too busy trying to save itself as they made their way out of the building. Sophie's magical powers cleared the way for them as they walked, and protected them from the heat.

"Jack." Sophie said. "I think… there may not actually be a person for you to kill."

Jack said nothing as they stepped out into the snow.

"Does it matter?" Jack asked, his voice testy. Sophie fell silent, her mind racing.

If there was no woman… that meant the rats were acting of their own accord. And if that was true…

"We have no reason to be here." Sophie said, with finality. "There's nothing to kill."

Jack gave her an inquisitive look.

They stomped out into the snow. The intense heat gave way to extreme cold. Sophie, who had shed a layer while she was inside, shivered. If she kept using her magic to preserve a normal body temperature she would collapse.

They stopped once they reached a significant distance away from the burning house and stared ahead. In the trees in front of them stood a number of rats. Some dressed in long, black hoods that covered their eyes and scalps. It then dawned on Sophie just what she was looking at.

"They've formed their own culture…."

One of the rats stepped forward. He was wearing, it seemed, the skull of a former comrade under his hood. It rose itself up on its hind legs and bellowed.

"Order of the Dragon!" It bellowed. "We cannot let you leave here alive."

The rats moved quickly, across the snow. Sophie, feeling certain that they were coming for her, froze in place. But instead they darted around through the snow, leaving behind lines in their wake.. The rat leader raised its forelegs upward, towards the sky.

"Arise, Grand Roddigan!"

Again Sophie was very slow on the uptake. The lines in the snow were in the shape of a summoning circle. They were attempting to call forth a demon.

She stepped forward, determined to put a stop to it, but before she could commit to an exorcism Jack pushed her aside.

She fell into the snow with a cry as he staggered forward, claws at the ready. She stared at him as he walked forward, completely unafraid. He had seen summoning circles, of course… he had been present when Belladonna had used one to drag the Eye of the Dragon into the flames of Hell. But the fact that he approached this one so confidently, when he was on the verge of death from disease, made her uneasy.

The snout of the demon was the first to raise from the portal in the snow. It sniffed the air, as if trying to sense prey, before thrusting a forelimb forward to claw its way out of the portal.

Before it could, however, Jack reached it, and with one fluid movement thrust his clawed first into its mouth. The thing let out a gurgle and a screech as it thrashed in place, but Jack stood firm. He brought up his other fist and struck the side of its head, violently, shattering its jaw. The beast gagged, as Jack pulled away, ripping out its insides.

He crushed the intestines in his hand as the demon crumbled, its limb body slumping over the summoning circle. It lay there for a while, before it slid backward back down from whence it came. Doubtless something on the other side had gotten hold of it.

The circle vanished as Jack stood facing the group of rats.

"Where is your leader?" Jack asked coldly. "Bring me your strongest."

There was dead silence. Clearly they had not expected this outcome. Sophie did not know how long they had been practicing black magic, but the demon they had chosen to summon clearly hadn't been all that powerful. At least, not compared to the man it was brought out to kill.

"If you do not." Jack said. "I will have no choice but to kill all of you."

The rats stood frozen. The pressure in the air was palpable. Even Sophie found herself feeling a little intimidated.

"Enough." A cold, icy voice hissed.

One of the rats looked up.

"Grandmama!" It said. "Please… You are not strong enough!"

"It is the only way." The voice said.

The snow began to pick up around them. Jack grinned wildly as the wind shifted into a blizzard, lowering visibility to zero. Sophie, feeling the chill, tightened her coat around herself. It was starting to feel a little thin.

The snow settled. Standing there, in between the rats and Jack, was a new creature. Although was in the shape of a large, plump figure, great writing tentacles writhed from underneath its fingernails, trailing the ground. The neck was misshapen and oddly bent, and the eyes were completely sunken in, as if they had been eaten away.

“See what I have become?” The thing rasped. Sophie felt her heart chill.

“Jack, she’s infected with the Astra parasite!” She shouted. “She can’t die until the parasite is destroyed!”

The Infected raised her arms and bowed her head. The tentacles wiggled wildly, as if they were alive.

“It is true.” She said. “For over a hundred years I have lived, in order to guide my beloved grandchildren in their purpose. To exterminate all of the world’s witches.” A long, writhing tentacle flickered past her lips as she spoke. Sophie winced. Her mind was racing with every little piece of information she knew about the Astra Parasite.

Jack, however, seemed very much unbothered by his new opponent.

“So you’re a little uglier than we thought.” He said. “Big deal. Your grandchildren still love you.”

To Sophie’s great surprise, the creature actually laughed.

“I truly regret this, you know.” The creature said, as it pointed its fingers at Jack. The whip like tendrils lashed out at their own accord. Jack raised his arm and tried knocking it aside, but the long tentacle quickly wrapped around his arm, tightly, and pulled back. Jack staggered slightly, digging his heels into the ground, as the other tentacle whips on the other fingers began lashing at him at a furious pace.

A single hit came so quickly and hit so hard that Jack couldn’t even scream in pain before the second and third hits struck at different points on his body. He staggered slightly, and brandished the claw on his free hand.

When the fourth tentacle came near, he grabbed it, tearing into it was his claws. A flow of fluid poured out from the tentacle and onto his claw. Sophie let out a quick cry of alarm as the fluid, once it contacted the scales on his arm, grew into small tentacles of their own and waved around wildly. Normally, the parasite would grow and try to enter through an orifice in any way it could. But since it landed on the hard, dragon scales rather than his exposed flesh, the parasite wasn't able to latch itself on to his arm.

The tiny tentacles waved around harmlessly as Jack pulled the whip. The Infected dug her feet into the ground to prevent being flung over to where Jack was. Sophie's eyes flittered downward, and she realized that the parasite had grown out of the bottom of her feet, and had hardened itself into sharp, bird like talons that gripped the earth.

The Infected raised her right hand and brought down all five of the tentacles on it on Jack. They wrapped around his neck, his right arm, and his leg.

She pulled him apart. Jack let out a cry as the powerful tentacles, each gripping him from a different angle, pulled with all of their might. He was going to be ripped in half.

He opened his mouth to scream, and like lightning one of the free tentacles shot forward, and began to force itself down his throat.

"No!"

Jack gagged. The tentacle was far too big to bite down on.

He adjusted his one free leg and pulled his right arm, the one that had only a single tentacle attached to it. It strained to hold him still, but Jack managed to adjust his grip enough to grab it with his claw.

SLASH

He cut himself free with his fingers. Immediately he swiped upward, severing the parasite that had entered his throat. He coughed up the remains and turned on the others.

SLASH SLASH!

The Infected charged towards him at frightening speed, its head bent as the severed tentacles immediately sprouted anew. Once more they reached for him, but in one fluid motion he cut through them all, reeled back, and thrust his first through her chest, where her heart should be.

"Ugh!"

"No!" Sophie cried.

The parasite sprouted out of the body of its host and wrapped itself around Jack's hand. He tried to pull back, but the Parasite was already doubling down on its grip on him. This time, attached directly to a host, it had no problem rapidly growing on Jack's arm, making its way to his mouth.

"Stop it!" Sophie cried. "Cut it off!"

Jack took his other, free hand and clawed his entrapped one. It cut it loose and ripped it off. The parasite, having lost its host, fell limp right at the end of Jack's clawed arm. He stepped back, running claws on his free hand over the scales, tearing the parasite from him where it fell to the ground, unmoving. Without a host to feed itself the parasite would very quickly die in the exposure of the natural world.

The Infected raised itself back upward. The parasite had already completely finished mending the chest of its host. Sophie's mind was racing.

"Jack!" She shouted. "Those who have mastered the use of the Astra parasite typically host it in the brain! Go for her head!"

He turned back to look at her. She had to stop herself from screaming: A tentacle was growing out of his mouth and was thrashing about wildly. He reached up and ripped it out.

"Don't." He snarled. "Tell me how to fight."

He coughed again and another tentacle burst out of his mouth. Sophie stared. Her mind turned back to when the tentacle had entered his mouth.

Had he… too become infected?

He ripped the second tentacle out of his mouth as he turned back to his opponent. Sophie watched, enraptured, as they squared off again.

“You are already dead.” The Infected thing said. “Even if you kill me, you will not leave here a living man.”

Jack took a step forward, and then winced. He wobbled for a bit, and then fell to one knee.

“I am sorry.” The Infected said. “But very soon, you will be worse than dead.”

Jack struggled to his feet. He gagged again, and another tentacle sprouted out of his mouth. It wriggled violently back and forth, and he did not even try to rip it out.

Sophie pushed herself backward in the snow, certain for that he was already infected. And considering how vulnerable she was… she would almost certainly be next.

Jack gagged again. Sophie was sure that he was about to sprout some more tentacles, but to her very great surprise the parasite simply fell out of his mouth. He rubbed his throat, bent over, and then threw it.

Weak little tentacles came flying out, desperately trying to latch onto a host in their dying throes.

Sophie stared. He was so sick that the parasites couldn’t latch onto his insides.

Jack rubbed his mouth and faced his opponent. The Infected stood tall, considering him greatly.

“You are ill.” She said. “Yet you can still stand and fight me.”

Jack coughed again, and took a step forward.

“You are on your last legs.”

Jack took another step forward.

“You will not-“

Jack thrust his claw forward. In one furious explosive blow, his clenched fist penetrated the Infected's skull. The green ooze of the Astra parasite blew out at the back, and Jack carefully retracted his hand from it, careful not to get any of the ooze on his bare skin.

"Did you get it?" Sophie called, hardly daring to believe it. Masters of the Astra Parasite were thought of as being completely invincible.

The body twitched, and soon the head was reforming.

"Tch." Jack made an irritated sound with his mouth. "I thought you said this thing would die if I got the head!"

"You probably didn't kill the parasite." Sophie said.

"How do I kill it?"

Sophie closed her mouth. She bit her lip, and did not want to admit it out loud.

"I…. don't know."

"Ugh."

The wild tentacles tried to grab Jack again, but he brought his fist upward and knocked her head clean off of her shoulders. The head went spinning through the air. Jack stared up to look at it, his eyes narrowed, as the parasite rose out of its neck.

"Watch out!"

The tentacles of the parasite reached for him. Just behind them, Jack could make out the parasite reforming into an exact replicate of the woman's head.

It was then that Sophie sat up. Her brow furrowed. If the parasite had been based in the head, like she had initially assumed, then it would have grown new body parts out of that rather than the body itself. So that meant…

"Jack! Try attacking the spine!"

Jack thrust his hand down the still reforming neck and penetrated her insides even further. The tentacles writhed up, trying to strike,

but before they could reach him Jack grabbed hold of her spine and ripped it out of her body.

It was exactly what Sophie expected: The spine had been completely replaced by the parasite itself. It thrashed violently in his grip, but with no host to leech off of it was already in its dying throes. Jack held it up, as it went still.

“Monster!”

Jack threw the remains of the parasite aside as he turned to face the rats. They had raised their hands again, seemingly intent on more magic.

“That’s enough.” Sophie found herself saying, clambering to her feet. The rats stopped as she staggered towards them.

“Your god is dead.” Sophie said. “And we have killed it.”

“More like I killed her.” Jack murmured. To Sophie’s great surprise he stumbled. He would have fallen over completely if she did not grab him and hoist him back up. He had already passed out.

She stared at him, completely taken aback by how quickly he had succumbed to his injuries after winning the fight, but pushed aside the feeling immediately. He had been through more in this encounter than he ever had before.

If they were going to get out of here alive, it was up to her.

The rats stared at them. Sophie was sure they were about to attack. And then suddenly one of the rats bowed his head.

“I am conflicted.” The rat said. “It is true that you have killed the Progenitor… But it was her greatest wish that you leave here unharmed.”

“She wanted to die.” Another rat said. “Many seasons ago…”

“She kept herself alive for us.”

There was a forlorn, melancholic silence. Sophie, who had honestly been expecting another fight, was completely taken aback.

“She cared about you.” Sophie said. “More than anything. Didn’t she?”

There was a silence between them.

“Using the Astra parasite to prolong your life is excruciatingly painful.” Sophie said. “Keeping herself alive, no matter what must have meant the world to her. It wasn’t just about killing witches… It was about securing a future for you.”

She was bullshitting them harder than she had ever bullshitted anyone before, but it seemed to have some kind of effect. She was surprised to see that a number of them were crying. She pushed on, determined for them both to survive.

“Maybe.” She said. “This is what she wanted for you.”

The rats looked at her.

“I’m sorry for your loss.” Sophie said, as she adjusted Jack onto her shoulder. “Um. Excuse me.”

She turned and made her way into the forest. She had barely managed to carry Jack ten steps when the rats called after her.

“Human!”

Sophie stopped, her breath hitching in her throat.

“If it was not Grandmama’s wish.” The rat said. “We would kill you here and now.”

Sophie turned back around and faked a smirk.

“We’re all just dead men walking.” She said.

Even with the rats choosing to not fight them further, the natural elements and Sophie’s overall fatigue caught up to her. She was about to pass out by the time she stumbled onto the road, where a passerby car narrowly avoided hitting them.

She passed out the instant the driver got her inside, and it was not long after that that she was taken to the Hospital. When she awoke, it was to her Father’s face staring down at her.

“Dad.” Sophie said, a little bit surprised. “What are you… doing here?”

“Looking after you, silly.” Phil Langley said. “We were worried sick.” He raised a glass of water to her lips and she sipped eagerly. She needed to get her strength back.

“Where’s Jack?”

“Another hospital.” Phil said. He sounded a little bit bitter. “We have our people looking at him… he’s not doing very well. The Astra Parasite came very close to infesting within him him.”

“I thought it had.” Sophie admitted.

“Thankfully the fact that he was so ill with that disease made it difficult for the parasite to take too deep of a hold. We were able to excise its remains quite handedly, and now he simply needs a lot of bed rest and recovery time.”

He smiled down at her.

“As do you, from what I understand. You saved his life. You’re his hero.”

“I don’t feel like a hero.” Sophie said, her voice quiet.

“Most heroes never do.” Phil said gently. He reached forward and stroked her head. “Your Mother and I are very proud of you.”

SEVEN FIGHTS REMAINING

Tiny Timmy

Tyrannosaurus Rex

United States of America

Recuperating took them both a very long time. Sophie had pushed herself beyond her limits to keep them both alive. She had been instructed to take long naps, eat well, and take it easy for as long as it took to recover. Jack, due to the danger he had been in, was out of commission even longer. Sophie was informed by Belladonna, his woman, that the ordeal had been very taxing for him as well.

Their mission, until just recently, was to get better. Now that they were, however, they met again for their next assignment.

"We're going to America." Sophie informed him.

"Joy." Despite being American himself, Jack had little love for his home country. He was very much unlike most American members of the Order in that regard, and Sophie found herself respecting him for it. "Who's the next target?"

"His name is Tiny Timmy." Sophie said, as she glanced over the pamphlet. "He's a T-rex."

"He's a what?"

"A dinosaur." Sophie repeated impatiently. "A number of them survived the Cataclysm by moving underground. They maintain a civilization there to this day called Astoria."

"So… uh, why aren't we going there?"

"Because he doesn't live in Astoria, genius." She told him, exasperated. "Look. Timmy loves humans. He's famous for it. He's unusually small for a T-Rex, only about eight feet high…"

"What makes him dangerous, then?" Jack asked. "I'd rather fight a full sized T-Rex."

"His mind." Sophie said, her voice grim. "He's a MIT graduate and has a number of patents to his name. He's done a lot of work on prosthetic limb technology, and he's spent his life trying to advocate for legalized passage between the surface and Astoria."

"That's… bad?"

"If you like not being hunted by dinosaurs every waking moment." Sophie said, her voice impatient. "The fact that they've stayed underground is the only reason humanity has become the dominant species. It is essential they stay where they are."

Jack stared at her.

"I don't see the problem."

Sophie had to stop herself from rolling her eyes.

Within a week they had flown to America, and it took them another day to reach the location by car. Sophie found herself appalled by how empty and desolate the American countryside was, and tried distracting herself with a book. Jack, however, was unable to sit still. He was clearly anxious to get back into the thick of things, and honestly Sophie couldn't blame him. Now that she had gotten onto the field of battle once, it was difficult to pull herself away. For the first time she understood how her Mother felt.

"We're here."

They came to a stop inf front of a large farm house. Sophie stared.

"This is it?" She repeated blankly. In the distance she could see a number of cows and sheep grazing. She was so enraptured that she jumped when Jack tapped on the window.

"You coming?"

Sophie dutifully got out of the car, still staring at her surroundings.

"He lives here?" She asked, a little taken aback. "Why?"

The oversized front door to the house burst open.

"Why hello there!"

Sophie let out a scream as the dinosaur, eight feet tall and overweight, stumped its way toward them. Giant cybernetic arms, longer and more powerful than the ones he had been born with, swung back and forth with every mighty step. Each of the mighty blades at the end of each finger glinted in the sunlight.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?"

He held out his claw to him, and it took Sophie a moment to realize that he wanted to shake hands. Jack, having caught on as well, reached forward and gripped his hand.

"We're here to kill you." Jack said.

The dinosaur laughed. "Many have tried, many have tried. Who sent you? Not the American government, I can tell… Not Astorian either, they always use raptors…"

“The Order of the Dragon.” Sophie told him.

“Hmmm!” The T-Rex said. “I see. Lucille Langley sent you, then?”

“She’s my Mother.” Sophie said.

“Really!”

The dinosaur peered down at her and Sophie was certain that he was about to bite down on her. The dinosaur laughed.

“I honestly couldn’t tell!” He said. “I can tell humans apart, of course. But you don’t look much like Lucille to me.”

“You know my Mother?”

“I met her at Grey Arcadia once, when I was giving a lecture there about how Astoria is over reliant on the Astra Parasite.” The dinosaur answered. It was such a normal response that Sophie found herself almost at a loss for words. “I liked her. She struck me as an intelligent, sophisticated woman.”

“She was the one who ordered us to kill you.” Jack told him.

“Funny how that works out sometimes.” Timmy said amicably. “I notice that you haven’t attacked yet.” He relinquished his handshake with Jack.

Jack grinned.

“I could say the same for you.”

“I don’t relish combat.” The dinosaur told him. “I only go about armed out of necessity.” He wiggled the blades on his fingers. “My people aren’t welcome to live among you. For good reason, I might add.”

“You seem to be doing just fine.”

“Well, there are those on the surface who would do business with me.” Timmy said airily. “Universities, primarily…. Terror crystals aren’t very well understood on the surface. I like to think I’ve proven myself to be trustworthy.”

“My Mother thinks otherwise.” Sophie told him. “Don’t think we’ll spare you because of your academic accomplishments.”

"I'm very sorry to hear that." Timmy said. "But it can't be helped."

He turned and stomped away from them. They could see that on his back were the cybernetic attachments that handled the 360 degree Terror Laser System that dinosaur warriors favored in battle. Sophie flinched as the laser whirled around, pointing at them.

"I've worked very hard to build a sustainable life for myself up here." Timmy said, as he cast a look around at his farm. "I learned how to raise animals for my own consumption while attending MIT. I had a full scholarship due to the generosity of Praetor Americana. I was allowed to ignore the laws of my country in order to study here, in the Land of the Free."

He turned around. His eyes had become that of a killer.

"I will not give that up for anything."

He and Jack lunged at each other. The metal claws of the T-Rex stretched farther than Jack's own, and before Jack could reach his enemy's face he had already struck him once, slashing his cheek in a deep gash and sending him sprawling to the ground.

Jack spun, kicking out his legs in a vicious kick, but the T-Rex's legs were so powerful, and so muscular, that even a direct blow had little effect.

Jack pulled away as the claws came down on him again. He narrowly managed to back away, narrowly avoiding the blades as they came down on him, one after the other. He backed away in a sort of bridge pose, moving left and right to avoid the attacks.

In the end Jack managed to bring up his arm and swatted the blades away with a hit to the limbs. The arm twitched somewhat, absorbing the hit, before embedding itself on the ground next to him.

Jack spun around, trying to slash at the arm with his claw, but the T-Rex raised a mighty leg and stomped on him.

Jack had never felt so much pressure in his life. He gasped, blood spurting out of his mouth, as the sheer weight and power of the

monster on top of him nearly crushed his bones.

"An ordinary T-Rex is thirty precent bigger than I, with significantly more muscle mass and power." Timmy said, sounding amused. "Sometimes I think the reason I became so fascinated with humans was because your species were smaller and weaker than I…"

Jack curled his arm upward and swiped pitifully at the ankle of the T-Rex. Although the attack drew blood, the T-rex did not seem to even notice it. He was already making eyes at Sophie.

"Tell your Mother I said 'hi.'

Jack adjusted his fingers so that the clawed blades could penetrate the leg. With the last of his strength he squeezed.

"Yeow!"

The T-Rex pulled away just a little bit out of sheer reflex, but that was all Jack needed. He pushed his hand against the dinosaur's foot and dug in his heels, and pushed himself out. He rolled and leapt to his feet, breathing heavily.

The Dinosaur watched him warily, the eyes of a predator fixed squarely on him.

"You possess the Dragon Within." He said. "My people believe those with your gifts shouldn't even be considered human."

He raised his arms. The blades on his fingers opened up to reveal the barrels of weapons. A flash of light erupted from them, and Jack cried out in pain as the beams of light erupted from them, penetrating his legs, chest, and waist. Even his arms, which usually withstood even the most lethal of attacks, had been completely penetrated.

"You idiot." Sophie seethed. "Don't just stand there and get hit!"

Jack stumbled forward as the Dinosaur adjusted his beam.

"If you were an ordinary man." The T-Rex said. "That would have killed you. They say that the only way to kill a dragon is to destroy its reason to live."

Jack grinned. “I live to fight.”

“You are deplorable.”

More lasers fired out of finger blasters, .Jack raised his arms and tried blocking them. The lasers slammed into his arms, and burned holes through his beautiful blue scales.

When the attack stopped, Jack lowered his guard and again leapt forward. The blades of on the claws clicked back into place and they clashed again. Jack again tried to sever the robotic arm, but the dinosaur kept him at such a wide distance that it was impossible to get in a good shot. The other arm came down on him, and Jack had to block it. He grimaced as the T-Rex leered down at him, and then lunged forward, mouth gaping wide.

Jack dove under him, readied his claws, and lunged upward, going for the neck. The metal arms swung around and jabbed at him, slashing him in the side. His momentum, however, carried him upward, and with a vicious thrust penetrated Timmy’s neck with his hand.

Timmy roared with pain as the claw embedded itself deep into his neck. Jack tried tearing out his throat, but before he could the large metal claws of his opponent swerved back around and caught him in the side.

“UGH!”

The long, powerful claws, perhaps about a foot long in length, managed to impale him in the side Jack cried out in pain as the claws embedded themselves deep into his side. Jack deepened his grip on the T-Rex’s neck as he was lifted into the air.

In a burst of inspiration, he struck at the claw with his own.

SLICE.

The metal fell apart. Jack fell to the ground as the second claw came down on his head. He leapt back, and with a mighty lurch ripped the giant metal claw from his body and held it aloft, brandishing it rather

like a spear. The blood that was pouring out of his side was pouring out in a fountain… before quickly coming to a stop.

"You have been trained very well." Timmy observed. A robotic arm protruded from his back and began doing external inspections of the damage done to the arm. Little drones soon followed, and with precise surgical precision began correcting the wiring began preparing for a replacement. "No ordinary man could have endured all of that."

"It's the dragon in me." Jack said airily. "You're not bad yourself."

"Thank you." Timmy said. "You know, dinosaurs are more closely related to dragons than humans are."

From behind him a large, metallic object was flying through the air. It rotated, adjusted itself, and then fit itself snugly onto Timmy's arm. This new prosthetic was a large, mounted cannon more powerful than the smaller laser beams that he had used previously. Three small fingers protruded from the end of this attachment.

"You rely on your natural talents, like a dinosaur." Timmy continued. "And I fight more like a man."

"Enough talk." Jack growled. He leapt forward, his fist raised. Timmy fired.

A large orb of bright blue energy erupted from the cannon. Jack raised his arm and swatted it aside. He had intended for the beam to simply bounce off his scales, but his arm burst out in pain as the scales shattered under the sheer force of the blow. The orb of power shot off into the distance and exploded destroying an entire hill.

Jack kept moving. Ignoring the pain, he thrust his other hand at the dinosaur's chest. Timmy adjusted his large metal claw, and blocked the strike. Jack's claws embedded into the metal. He pulled wildly, sending sparks flying as the wires within burst. But the claw was still fully functional. It pulled back as the cannon was thrust back into Jack's face.

"ARRRRRRGH!"

The explosion hit him square in the face. Sophie screamed in surprise as the explosion his entire form. She was sure that he had been killed.

The dinosaur pulled away, as the blast cleared, staring straight ahead as the smoke cleared. Jack was still standing there, arms at his sides, staring up at the sky.

"That… hurt." Jack whispered, as he gave his head a small shake. The ground around him had been completely devasted: The Earth itself had been pulverized around him, so much so that not even dirt remained.

Sophie stared.

"H-how did he survive that?"

Even Timmy seemed somewhat surprised.

"That was enough raw force to destroy a building." He said. "Concentrated into a smaller point, no less. Your body can take an intense amount of punishment."

Jack grinned. He got back into a fighting stance.

"Y-yeah…"

"Yet you can still be killed." Timmy continued, as he raised the cannon again. "Goodbye, boy."

He fired. Sophie screamed as the ball came back out again. But this time Jack swatted his hand in front of him, sending the ball back where it came from.

Timmy had no ability to react as the explosion caught him squarely in the face. He was blown backward, rolling along the ground like a rag doll, as Jack leapt upward, and then fell down on him like a giant bird of prey.

The cannon, it seemed, was specifically designed for long range combat. When he brought it up to defend himself Jack cut it to pieces immediately, leaving only the badly injured claw on his right hand. Timmy brought it up to stab him away, but Jack quickly tore

into with his claws, He ripped and tore the arm so badly, that it could not be used.

He then moved down to strike at the Dinosaurs center. The monster roared and kicked at him, but Jack managed several powerful slashes, tearing apart skin and muscle before the teeth of the T-Rex caught onto his left arm.

It was very close: The teeth and jaws were not powerful to break the scales of the Dragon, but he quickly tugged his head back downward, attempting to rip the arm off at the socket. Sensing this, Jack had no choice but to cease his assault. He used his other hand to attempt to pry the other hand free.

The T-Rex adjusted its body and managed to kick him right when his arm slipped out of his grip. He rolled along the ground as the dinosaur shakily got to its feet, bleeding profusely from the center. The torn and dismembered arms, now useless, detached themselves from their sockets as replacements soared in from the house behind him.

"That is three prosthetics you've destroyed now." Timmy said. The two sets of drones made the necessary repairs and adjustments to his arm sockets before the prosthetics attached themselves in place. The drones returned to their position in the Terror Defense System, spun wildly, and then came back out, this time glowing a bright orange. They made their way to where Jack had cut into Timmy's body, pressed against either side, and then began to stitch his body together.

"Yes, impressive, isn't it?" Timmy asked, as Jack gaped. "I designed the system myself…"

He flexed his two new arms. This time he was armed with a powerful chainsaw attachment that seemed to be built into a shotgun, and a large shield.

"Now." Timmy said, as he adjusted his stance so that the shield stood firm in from of him, with the shotgun's barrel pointing out at the side.

Jack grimaced. He raised his arms to protect his face as he charged forward. The shotgun, which was so large than it ended up firing significantly more powerfully than a standard shotgun, peppered him furiously as he made his approach. The arms protected his face, and his natural magical aura protected the rest of his body. He reached the side of the shield, and punched.

The shield cracked. A powerful, electric shock jolted into his arm, but because of the power of the Dragon Within he didn't even feel it. He brought up his other fist to completely shatter the shield into pieces.

The shotgun converted into a chainsaw, and it came down on him, whirring violently. Jack blocked the attack with his arm and grimaced as the blade whirred into his arm, shattering its teeth on his skin. The chainsaw pulled away and converted back into the shotgun, but Jack ignored it completely, choosing instead to go for the wound he had already inflicted on his waist.

"Ugh!"

The wounds that had been sutured by the drones tore apart under his claws. He clawed and tore at his flesh, trying to reach something critical, as the shotgun fired down at him.

Even at point blank range, Jack's aura was so overwhelming powerful that the bullets didn't even come close to touching him. They swerved off in a myriad of directions. Including back at the dinosaur itself.

"Raaaaaaaagh!"

Timmy thrust his head downward, trying to bite into Jack's skull. Jack looked up, and thrust both arms into the dinosaur's mouth.

The teeth clamped hard onto the scales of the dragon, but could not penetrate them. Jack thrust his arms upward, lifting the T-rex completely off of the ground. Timmy instinctively gripped his arm even more firmly with his teeth as Jack swung him up, and then back down with incredible force.

The sheer size and weight of the T-rex, coupled with the force of Jack's throw, shattered the ground. The dinosaur clawed at the

earth, trying to regain control of the situation, as Jack lifted him back up and slammed him back down again.

Again Timmy tried getting his bearings… jerking his head to try and throw Jack off balance, before being picked up and thrown again.

He relinquished his grip on Jack's claw. Jack pulled his hand back, and then forward again into his skull.

CRACK.

Jack split open his skull and grabbed hold of a massive chunk of his brain. He pulled, taking out a large chunk of it. He closed his claw, crushing it in his grip as he stared at the dinosaur.

The body of the beast shuddered, before going limp.

"Well, that's that." Sophie said, as she came up from behind him. "That was one of your easier fights, I would say. Especially after that last one."

Jack didn't move.

"It's not over."

She stopped.

"Uh?"

The TERROR defense system on the back of the creature was flashing bright red. The drones that had previously repaired the wound flew upward and attached themselves to its head.

The body sat up.

"Astra mode activated." The Terror Defense system said, as the mouth to the monster fell open, unable to maintain its musculature.

"Incredible." Sophie murmured. "It's stimulating his muscles via electric shocks so that he can keep fighting after death."

The dinosaur stumbled towards them, at first, before breaking out into a run. Jack stood his ground as the things jaws tightened, and it tried biting down on him.

Jack brought up his hand in a vicious punch under the chin, sending it flying several feet up into the air. But there was no roar of pain, no sound at all.

“Dead things can’t feel pain.” Sophie told him. “It was the same with the White Plague, remember?” She had already taken several steps back as the dinosaur fell back down, angling its head to fall right on top of Jack’s head.

He hit it again, sending it sprawling across the grass leading up to the house. The dinosaur writhed back on the ground, trying to regain its footing, as Jack slowly walked up to it.

“You’re dead.” Jack said, his voice toneless. “Why are you still fighting?”

The T-Rex attempted to take a bite out of his leg, but Jack kicked, breaking its jaw. It hung limply at its side, unable to move any further.

The body tried flinging itself at him, to crush him with its weight, but Jack simply hit it again, sending it flying through the air and into the house behind him. It crashed through the wall and exposed the building to the outside world.

Instead of a proper interior, the entire building seemed to be nothing more than a gigantic laboratory. Giant tubes of blue liquid ran from floor to ceiling, casting the room in an eerie glow.

“Jack.” Sophie said immediately. “We have to destroy it.”

“Destroy what?”

The blue lights pulsated. The TERROR Defense system detached itself from the dinosaur and hovered in the air, rotating wildly, before inserting itself into a tray right behind it.

“Jack.”

“What?”

“Do it.”

Jack cautiously stepped up to where the limp, unmoving body of the dinosaur lay as he surveyed his surroundings. The whirring lights, bright blue glow, and number of advanced technology made him feel he was looking at technology at least a hundred years more advanced than it was now.

"Consciousness transfer complete." The TERROR defense system said, and then fell silent.

A large, elaborate screen in front of him clicked on.

"So you killed me, did you?"

Jack stared up at the face of Tiny Timmy on the screen above him.

"What are you doing?" Sophie screamed. "Smash it!"

"My body." Timmy said. "Was always frail and weak."

Jack took a step towards him and leaned in.

"For as long as I could remember." He went in. "I wanted to be strong. Before I discovered science, before I discovered my love of Man, I knew that I had to be strong."

Jack slammed his hand on the computer panel.

"My entire life's work has led up to this." The T-Rex went on. "My Dream…. To tear down the barriers between Astoria and the Earth."

"Jack!" Sophie screamed. "You have to stop him now!"

"Behold!"

The screen clicked off.

For a very brief second nothing happened. And then, out of nowhere, the ground beneath their feet began to rumble.

Jack stepped back as the lab under him shifted. The floor between the lab split open to reveal a chasm hidden deep underground. An elevator was rising up, deep from within the depths of the cavern. The gap grew wider and wider as the rumbling grew louder, and soon a gigantic shape was beginning to become visible in the darkness.

The TERROR Defense System rose upward and then dived downward, implanted itself into a new dais on this new machine.

Jack watched as the gigantic elevator rose itself to its full height. The first thing he caught sight of was the giant head of a T-Rex: plated in heavy metal and artillery. It was ten times the size of the real one, silver in color.

The rest of the body soon followed, and it was just as gigantic as the rest of it. The elevator came to a stop and the giant mecha dinosaur loomed over him, staring over the horizon.

Bright blue lines flashed along the surface of the metal, and the eyes lit up.

"Transfer complete." The robot said, its voice toneless.

The head turned downward and stared at Jack.

"You may have killed me, but I will not die." The dinosaur said. "Stop me, if you can."

The giant took one, mighty step forward, nearly crushing him. Jack leapt backward as the giant machine raised one giant leg and stepped forward.

It was a lot faster than he would have expected, considering its size. The ground shook and crumbled when it put its weight down.

"Jack, that thing is a Kaijuu." Sophie said. "It's too much, we need to retreat-"

He ignored her. He took one step forward, and then leapt up. He clung onto the side of the metal monstrosity with his claws, and pulled himself up.

The robot ignored him. It took another step forward. Jack found himself being shaken loss, and had to cling on for dear life. Sophie grimaced. She leapt back, distancing herself from the battle, and reached for her phone.

"Uh, hello? Yeah, I think the world might be in danger…"

Jack grimaced as he adjusted his claws, desperately trying to cling on without tearing right through the metal. Although the armor of the machine was thick and powerful, doubtless designed to withstand military assault weapons and tankfire, Jack would have easily torn through it like butter if he wasn't careful.

He gingerly climbed up the machine, one hand at a time, his feet desperately scraping at the side of the metal. The machine took no notice of him: It simply kept taking large steps forward. But even that was enough to throw him off balance. He slipped, causing him to slide down the entire leg of the machine, sending sparks flying.

The monster kept moving, completely unhindered.

"Come on, you bastard. Fight me!"

"I will not." The giant, booming said. "Mankind is not my enemy."

It took another mighty step forward. Jack glowered at it. He raised his claw and struck at the side of the leg.

He tore open the metal and reached for the wiring inside, ripping it apart. When he pulled away, little drones from the inside immediately appeared, rather like insects, and began repairing the damage. The machine continued unhindered.

Jack didn't know a lot about giant robots. His supposition, however, was that there were fail safes to keep the machine moving and fighting even when under severe damage. The robot itself did not seem particularly disturbed by him: Clearly, it did not even see him as a threat.

"Big mistake." Jack whispered, as he resumed his climb.

The robot continued moving, carefully avoiding wildlife and natural beauty as Jack climbed. Assuming this thing was like a car, or a person, a critical spot had to be hidden somewhere in its frame. His first assumption would be the center, in the torso area, or the head. He discounted the head… he had seen how Tyrannosaurs used their heads in combat. It had to be in the center. But where, exactly?

And why wasn't he trying to defend himself?

The great thing continued marching forward. Jack reached its upper thigh, and in one fluid movement ripped the thing into pieces. Almost immediately the little drones swarmed in to commit repairs, but before they could even begin their work Jack had torn through the next layer, widening the hole and dragging himself inside.

It was extremely cramped, not to mention unbearably stuffy. Jack was sure that the engines or whatever was causing the thing to move was emanating an intense amount of heat. Only the sheer strength of his aura protected him from being incinerated as he crawled, tearing apart wires and machinery, further inside the beast.

The little repair drones were swarming around him, trying to repair the damage he was causing, and he had to fight his way through them as well. The repair drones were working so quickly that they were beginning to tighten the hole he had made for himself. Jack flinched, and then unleashed his aura.

The explosion of magical energy destroyed all of the drones immediately, but it also caused the hole he had created to widen so much that he fell through. Without even thinking about it he spun around wildly, cutting everything within reach with his claws. He dropped down several feet, cut through the bottom of the robot, and then fell through, right next to its leg.

He slammed to the ground as the machine took another mighty step forward. He watched it move away, irritably.

"Jack!" Sophie cried out. "That thing… it's entirely synthetic! It has no resistance to magic!"

He shot her a look. "So?"

"Use some more aura attacks!"

Jack watched as the thing stomped away. He closed his eyes and focused his energy inward. Not in an intense explosion this time, but within him. He bent his knee, leapt forward, and turned into a bright blue streak.

Ca-ching!

The bolt of lightning tore through the robot right through the chest. It kept moving, undeterred, as Jack whirled around in mid-air, cast a dark look at it, and thrust himself forward again.

Ca-ching!

Again he tore right through the metal, blowing a giant hole in its chest and sides. Jack hit the ground, spun, and then faced his enemy again.

Ca-ching!

Ca-Ching!

Ca-Ching!

Over and over again he tore through the giant machine like lightning, ripping it apart piece by piece. He did this perhaps two dozen times before he finally fell to the ground, exhausted at Sophie's feet.

"You idiot." Sophie told him. "Did you even try to hit the-"

The giant machine crumbled. It's body, torn apart at the seams, could no longer retain its form. Its giant oversized arms fell to the ground, and its mighty body soon followed.

Sophie stared for a good long while at the remains of the Kaijuu in front of her, and then down to Jack.

"What are you?" She whispered.

SIX FIGHTS REMAINING

Osshus of the One Ocean

South Pacific

It took Jack considerably less time to recover this time around. By the next day he was out bouncing around, experimenting with his new control over his aura.

"You'll need it." Sophie said, her voice grim, as she set her tea down next to her. Jack, in a bright blue flash, appeared right next to her.

“Stop that, you could kill me.” She said, annoyed, as she opened up the folder in front of her. “The Stars are right, so it’s time to kill Osshus.”

“Uhh… What?”

“It’s a Starspawn.” She said, annoyed at his ignorance. “Millions of years ago it fought dinosaurs for control over the planet and lost. It’s been sealed under the ocean ever since. Waiting… for the stars to be right.”

“And when is that?”

“Well, every ten thousand years or so.” Sophie said casually. “But every time it surfaces something always knocks it back down. This time it’s going to be you.”

“Why do I have to knock it down? Can’t I just kill it?”

“No.” Sophie said, annoyed. “Don’t you know anything about Starspawn?”

Jack shook his head.

“They’re a kind of Tear.” She explained. “The collective fears of all living creatures on Earth… Monsters, Man, and dinosaur… take form in outer space and become creatures that prey on living things. So they travel for hundreds of millions of years to reach our planet, and devour us. The Starspawn are creatures formed before mankind had any fears… back when dinosaurs ruled the Earth. So they are considered the most alien to us.”

She gave him a dark look.

“Does my explanation make sense to you?”

“No.” Jack said bluntly. “Why can’t I just kill it?”

Sophie sighed, and shook her head.

This was a trip that took significantly more planning and time than any they had taken before. The undersea prison of Ca’bul was not fixed in one location. It floated under the ocean in a specific pattern to keep its one prisoner as exhausted and powerless as possible.

The Order had to locate it, and then prepare a ship for them. Sophie was aghast when her old school mate Stella Maris came knocking at the door.

"Hello." Stella said brightly. "Long time no see. Enjoying being a knight?"

"Very little." Sophie said dryly, as Stella bounced into the room. She looked quite a bit happier than Sophie had ever seen her. Unlike herself, who had been forced to guide Jack against her will, Stella Maris had ended up exactly where she wanted. On a ship with Captain De La Ray, keeping sea monsters at bay and preventing Merpeople from coming too close to human settlements.

"We found it easily enough." Stella told her. "But Nightlinde says the stars will be right very soon."

Out of all of the girls at the Knight Academy, Nightlinde, had by far the most experience with and knowledge of Starspawn. Her Father, the Knight of Nightmares, was one of the foremost talents at eliminating Tears in the Order. Her Mother, a scholar of Lovecraft's work, had told her stories of the macabre ever since she was a baby.

'Is she coming with us?"

"No, but she leant me this."

She lifted up a book titled *A Plebian's Guide To The Necronomicon.*

"That's so like her." Sophie said, in disgust. Stella Maris laughed.

They spent the next two hours or so pouring over the guide. Even though it was intended, as its title suggested, for complete beginners to this sort of thing, they both found themselves struggling with the abstract material.

"So it ruled the ocean millions of years ago?"

"People believe it, so it's true." Stella said patiently. Clearly Nightlinde had pressed that into her head so that she knew at least that much. "It's true nature is always shifting. The creature the dinosaurs defeated and sealed away is much different than it was millions of years ago… or even when it was last defeated a century ago."

Sophie recalled words that Nightlinde had said once. “Tears, by their nature, are incomprehensible to humans, because they’re made up of so many of our primal fears.”

“And the one thing that vanquishes all fear is hope.”

Sophie turned around. Her Mother, Lucille, walked in behind them. She was smiling gently.

“Oh, Lady Langley.” Stella said, a little taken aback, as she got to her feet. “My apologies, I had no idea you were home-“

“There’s no need for that.” Lucille said, as Stella Maris made a clumsy attempt at a curtsy. “You two are part of the next generation of knights… in another ten years you will likely be my equal.”

Stella flushed at the praise, but Sophie frowned. She knew perfectly well that Lucille was referring more to Stella than to her daughter.

It took them about another week of planning before they were ready to leave. Jack, having spent the time training his new found powers, was excited to finally get back into battle. Upon settling into their rooms on Captain De La Ray’s ship he immediately fell asleep, telling Sophie that he was not to be disturbed until they arrived.

“I hope you weren’t expecting him to help.” Sophie sniffed. She and Stella Maris were leaning over the side of the ship, staring out at the open water.

“Of course not.” Stella said, sounding. “Our role is to maintain the ship. His is to fight.”

“Fighting on the open ocean probably isn’t a good idea.” Sophie said unhappily. “I wish we could do this on dry land.”

“If we could do that, Oshus would have been killed a long time ago.” Stella said. “We’ve been putting this off for too long.”

It was always something, wasn’t it? Sophie thought unhappily. At school they had always been taught that the world was always under threat from some kind of catastrophe… whether it was the military might of a corrupt country committing atrocities to its neighbors, to monsters wreaking havoc uncontested for hundreds of

years. She had learned that in school, yes, but it was now starting to feel startlingly real.

Stella turned to speak with another crewmate on the ship as Sophie saw something gold and shiny land on the deck right behind her.

"Oh, Stella, you dropped something." She said, as she bent to pick it up. Stella turned, and her eyes widened.

"Don't!"

As Sophie's fingers fell on the object she could feel a sudden invisible clamping on her arm. She cried out as she was flew over the side of the deck. In one fluid movement Stella Maris shot her arm upward, and the seawater below shot up in an elaborate fountain. The very tip of the spray froze over, becoming a sharp icy blade.

"Ugh!"

Sophie reeled backward. She glanced down at her arm and found that the glowing object she had grabbed hold of had wrapped around her wrist. She tugged at with her fingers… it had dug very deep into her skin.

"Oi!" Stella Maris cried, as she leaned over the side. "What are ye playing at?"

Sophie looked up to look and a head popped out of the water.

It was a mermaid… the biggest she had ever seen. The ones she were more familiar with, the extremely feminine beauties that sang songs and cared for lakes and rivers, were quite a sharp contrast with their deep sea cousin. This creature was more than twice the size of its counterparts, and more closely resembled a fish of prey than anything else. It stared up at them hungrily, its pure white eyes staring straight at them.

"My apologies, human!" The creature blubbered, in a surprisingly musical voice. "I don't always know what I catch, you see…"

"As if." Stella scoffed. "Anglars don't come up this close to the surface unless they want to eat humans."

“You are mistaken, milady.” The Anglar said. “I have a very good reason. Our Lord is rising!”

Sophie stopped struggling with the ring on her finger in surprise as the head of the creature ducked back underwater.

“Some Merpeople revere Tears as incarnations of their gods.” Sophie said, in disgust. “And because we fear them they sort of are. We’ll probably be fighting them too, tonight.”

The ship drifted across the waves, before coming to a stop.

“We’re here.” Stella said. “The prison is about a mile below the surface.”

“How is he getting down there?”

They heard a loud splash behind them. Startled, they turned and saw a man dive into the water.

“He’s not seriously going to swim?” Stella asked, appalled. “In a sea full of mermaids?”

Already they could see a wide range of fins, so numerous they were visible from the ship, converging towards him. They watched, holding their breath, as the water began to turn blood red. Soon after, the bodies of the merfolk floated up to the surface, bobbing up and down on the waves.

“I don’t think we need to worry about that.” Sophie said. “We should get ready.”

Jack held his breath as he swam downward. The remaining Merpeople in the area had scattered once they had realized what they were dealing with. The natural wildlife of the area had long fled as well, due to the presence of such an evil creature. Jack was completely alone as he descended, the warmth and light of the sun becoming fainter and fainter as he descended.

It was very dark by the time he caught sight of the prison. To his eye it resembled more a giant cage than anything else. It floated in the middle of the ocean, suspended by buoyancy, Although it seemed to be pure black, it pulsated with an intense magical energy

that called to him like a beacon. Jack swam, quickening his pace a little bit, as he swam in between the black bars of the prison.

To his great surprise, however, once he swam through the bars he found himself breathing fresh air. He pushed himself out from the sea and fell, landing on more of the black bars that seemed to be serving as some kind of walkway.

“Where the hell do I go?”

As if to answer his question, the walked shifted, as if it were alive. Seemingly beckoning him forward. Jack shrugged, and placing his hands in his pockets stalked forward.

It was strangely quiet in the prison. The silence of the deep ocean coupled with the strange alien architecture bult an unsettling atmosphere. Jack had the feeling that he was completely alone.

A gigantic black diamond shaped structure, placed in the exact center of the prison, stood before him. A single entrance led inside.

“Some prison.” Jack said, with disgust. “They didn’t even close the door.”

He stepped inside to pitch blackness. He blinked, expecting his eyes to adjust, but they never did.

“Hello?” Jack called out, as he took another step forward. “Is anyone there?”

Somehow the interior of this monolith seemed even quieter and more isolated than the outside. Jack took several steps forward, trying to find a sign of the prison’s sole inhabitant, when the opening behind him disappeared, casting the entire room into darkness.

“Welcome. Son of Dragons.”

The cold, emotionless voice seemed to emanate from all around him, washing over him like a blanket. Jack blinked, trying to rationalize where the sound was coming from.

“Hey.” He said. “Are you Oshus? I’m here to kill you.”

“I am.” The voice said. “And I am not.”

“Whatever.” Jack said. “I’m here to kill you.”

Strange laughter filled the room. Jack stood there in the darkness, listening.

“If it were not for this prison restraining me, you would already be dead.”

Jack narrowed his eyes.

“Fight me and let’s see who dies.”

“I do not fight. I simply am.”

Jack raised his hand. A bright blue eruption of aura shot from his palm and luminated the entire room briefly. There was nothing there save for himself. The light faded just as quickly as it had come.

“There’s no one here.” Jack said disparagingly.

“Is there?” A voice said from behind him.

Jack raised his fist and struck behind him, intending to clobber the voice in the face, but there was nothing there.

“Nothing… or everything?”

Jack lowered his fist, relaxing.

“Talk sense, don’t you?”

There was no reply.

“Maybe I’m just imagining things.” Jack said. “I-“

The walls of the monolith fell away. The pure black substance became clear in a split second.

On all sides eyes were staring down at Jack, and mouths filled with teeth stood agape. The laughter that had filled the room suddenly returned.

“Oh, there you are.” Jack said, as he slowly turned around, taking in the creature. It seemed to be enveloping him from all sides, and above and below. “What exactly am I looking at?”

The texture of the skin seemed to be flashing between black and purple as the flesh convulsed and pulsed.

“I am Oshus.” The thing said. “And you have just entered my domain.”

“You mean your prison?”

Jack doubtfully cast a look all around him. “What exactly-“

The purple substance fell away, melting away like water. Suddenly Jack found himself surrounded by stars.

He stepped off the platform into empty space and looked around. From all directions all he could see were glowing stars in the sky. It seemed almost as if he had been taken from the bottom of the ocean to the middle of space.

He stepped off of the platform and walked along the empty space. Although there was no clear surface to walk on, he was able to move ahead with little issue. His first assumption was that it was some kind of illusion, but as he walked it dawned on him that he had seen the exterior of the monolith, and how the entire prison had been surrounded by thick bars, it simply shouldn’t have been possible for him to walk in any one direction.

Soon enough the monolith disappeared out of sight behind him and Jack came to a stop. He watched as, in the distance, a planet that he could recognize as Saturn came into view. He turned, staring around at the cosmos around him.

“Where the hell are you?” Jack asked the void.

As if in answer, what seemed to be millions of streaks of light shot across the space around him. Jack stood completely still as the beams of light struck everything around him: Saturn exploded into a ball of fire and gas, and each streak of light that passed by him let out an unearthly wail that made his ears bleed.

“This.” The voice said. “Is my domain.”

The streaks of light increased in numbers and volume: they filled the void of space so completely that it seemed almost as if they covered every inch of deep space. One came veering right at Jack. He stood

completely straight as it shot towards him. The instant it came within striking distance he raised his fist.

The thing's wail became even sharper and more horrifying as Jack's fist knocked out off of its trajectory. It shot straight downwards, past down his feet and into the void below.

More of them came right at him, some of them changing their movements slightly to come at him at different angles. Jack stepped back, knocking them aside with his fists.

"Life can only exist on Earth." The voice continued. "You are out of your element."

The streaks of light came at him from above and below. Jack raised his leg and brought it back down, giving a heavy blow to the creature coming from below. In the same movement he twisted his arm in a vicious hook, catching the one from above unawares.

But dozens of the creatures were coming for him now, shooting across the void of space like missiles. Jack grimaced, and unleashed his aura.

Pure blue energy protruded from his body, forcing the creatures to swerve away from him. His aura was so powerful that even with their speed and power they couldn't even come near him. They swerved around him, shrieking wildly, as he stood there, staring straight ahead.

"I'm not interested in these insects." He said. "I'm interested in crushing you."

Every single one of the streaks of light began to converge upon him. From all angles he was surrounded by the monsters, and they were so great in number, numbering in the millions, that he could not push them away from him.

Jack narrowed his eyes and took a stance.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

He unleashed the full force of his aura into a massive explosion, the biggest he had ever managed. Everything within a mile's radius was

blasted to bits. Every shrieking creature was caught in the blast, and completely destroyed.

But more still came. Millions of the streaks of light veered towards him even as the explosion faded. Jack grimaced, staggering slightly from fatigue as the shrieks from the monsters became nearer and nearer.

He took a step forward, and in flash managed to transform into his entire being into a streak of aura. He soared forward, past the streaks of light, weaving so quickly between them that they were unable to catch him. Jack let out a gasp, his fatigue from the previous massive explosion catching up to him, and he reformed into flesh and blood.

The streak of light caught him completely unawares, slamming into him from the front. He gripped hold of it wildly, trying to find the strength to throw it aside, but to no fail. It hit him, and hit him hard, taking him with soaring through the stars.

One of Jupiter's moons, Ganymede, had been knocked clean out of orbit by the destruction of its planet. Jack winced as the creature gripped him more tightly, preventing him from even moving as the two of them slammed into the moon.

Jack hit the surface of Ganymede so hard that its surface cracked and broke. The creature became visible for a brief moment when they came to a stop, and Jack was able to make out tentacles and a wide, gaping mouth before he broke free of its grip and punched it, destroying its head with a single blow.

The other creatures, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, slammed into the moon as well before Jack could even get to his feet. The moon shattered into pieces from the sheer cumulative force of their impacts, and Jack found himself spinning on a small rock through space.

Three of the creatures were clutching onto the platform with him. Jack spun around, kicking them all off in one fluid movement before leaping to his feet.

The platform was still violently spinning, and although Jack's feet remained firmly planted on the surface of the remains of the moon, he was beginning to become dizzy. The creatures, however, seemingly acclimated to high stakes battles in deep space, had no trouble darting after them, although it seemed there were unwilling or unable to take up their previous astronomical speed. They leapt from rock to rock no differently than any other warrior.

"You're boring me." Jack said, as he leapt upward. A creature lunged at him, and he split it in half with a single punch. More came at him, and although he was still dizzy he managed to land each and every hit, each blow destroying their targets.

But there were still countless others. They all swarmed him, as Jack began to fall back down.

Fall…

Back down…

In space?

Jack landed on the pure black void of space and turned around in a complete circle, taking in his surroundings. He barely registered the monsters diving at him, staring at the environment around him.

"I was at the bottom of the ocean." He said. "How did I end up in space?"

He continued walking again, this time straight up ignoring the creatures making their way towards him, towards the sun. He stared at it. It wasn't as bright or as big as it should have been.

"I won't ask you again." Jack said, his voice cold. "Show yourself."

Giant solar flares shot around the surface of the sun, emblazoning the features of a monstrous face on it.

"Very well." The Sun said, the flares on its lips moving with its sound. "I see that there is no fooling you. After all… even a child knows that Man cannot survive in the Void."

"What is this place?" Jack asked, gesturing around. As he spoke the monsters began to slowly disappear, leaving him alone with his

enemy.

“An illusion.” The sun said. “Made to give us a shadow of a real fight.” His voice sounded disparaging.

“You’re saying that you can’t fight me?” Jack asked. “That’s why you’ve resorted to such cheap tricks?”

“This is a prison.” The Sun said. “To restrain my true power.”

“How do I let you out?”

The sun suddenly became very large.

“You would release me?”

“So I could kill you, sure.”

A giant flare that looked rather like a tongue shot forward and began to wag.

“Very well. Simply destroy the monolith. This place will crumble along with it.”

Jack turned to see that once more the strange black structure had appeared.

“Alright.”

He stepped back towards it and stepped inside. He gathered his inner energy, and in unleashed it all in one fierce explosion.

The Monolith held the explosion. At first. But soon enough bright blue flashes of light began to protrude from large cracks that were forming along the surface, and eventually… the entire thing gave way.

Jack gasped, falling to his knees as the entire prison around him gave way. The entire weight of the ocean around it fell down upon him, sweeping him away further onto the darkness of the deep sea.

A dark shadow descended upon him. Jack spun around,

Giant, glaring eyes were staring down at him from all directions.

“Fool!” Oshus hissed. “You have doomed your entire planet!”

Jack slashed at an eye with his claw, but it passed through as if it were water. He kicked away to get a little bit of distance as the shadow seemed to spread, only visible due to the orange glow of its eyes. It seemed almost to be melding with the ocean around it. It seemed less of a physical presence and more of a vague force.

Jack kicked his leg, trying to rebalance himself in the water. He jammed his thumb upward, towards the sky, and in one fluid movement his entire body became aura, and he shot up towards the surface, unencumbered by the resistance of the water.

He shot up out of the ocean at rocket speed, did a flip, and then landed back on the ship. He took a deep breath of air as Sophie shot him an exasperated look.

"What did you do?"

The ocean surrounding the ship was boiling, as if it were being heated in a large pot. The charred corpses of fish and merpeople rose to the surface, floating lifelessly on the surface of the water.

"He said he couldn't fight me unless I let him out."

"And you believed him?" Sophie asked incredulously. "Jack, that thing's been imprisoned for millions of years."

She gave a small cry as the ship under the water shifted. Below them, the ocean was beginning to spin rather wildly: The surface of the ocean was becoming a giant whirlpool.

"Keep the ship floating." Jack told her, as he moved to the side of the ship to stare down at the swirling mass of water below them. The crew were already running rampant around him, trying desperately to keep the ship afloat as it was dragged further into the whirlpool.

The ship tipped slightly, and a number of objects unrestrained behind him begin to slide over. Jack ignored them, his eyes focused on the center of the whirlpool.

A long, thin strand of black matter rose from the absolute center of the vortex. It twisted itself slightly, and then slowly rotated round in

a complete circle. It stopped, and then leaned towards the ship.

A large black mass leapt out of the sea like lightning. It seemed to have no true shape or form, it was nothing but a giant maw and teeth. Jack stood there as it lunged, its mighty teeth coming down on him.

Jack raised his fist, and an intense wave of aura surrounded it. He punched forward, and a bright blue shot that resembled his fist rocketed forward, catching the thing in its side.

WHOMP.

The blow knocked it off course and back into the water. Silence.

"It's coming from below!"

The thing lunged from the depths directly below them.

"Stella Maris!"

"Here!"

Stella leapt forward, spinning around wildly, and thrust her fists in front of her. A stream of water rose from the ocean and trailed under the ship, trailing past it and creating a trail of water in the sky.

The ship moved forward, sailing out of the thing's grip before the creature's jaws could warp around the ship. The creature angled itself to face them, its many eyes staring unblinkingly at them. It was a deep black in color, but it look nothing like any other creature on Earth. The surface of its body rippled, as if it were pure liquid rather solid, and when it moved forward to strike again it made no noise.

Jack stepped up to meet it as the crew scurried behind him, yelling orders and commands. The thing followed them up the water trail, seemingly gliding across the water. Its massive maw opened wide, and Jack could see that it could easily swallow the entire ship whole.

He raised his hand again and unleashed another shot of aura. The blue energy shot through the creatures mouth and exploded out of its back. But almost immediately the hole created by the attack

reformed. There was no blood, no cry of pain. There wasn't even a sign of injury.

It did not even slow down as it approached them. Jack stood there, leaning out over the side of the ship as it its jaws descended on him.

"WHUP!"

Jack thrust his fist upward in a vicious uppercut. The blow from his fist was absorbed into the blow like water, but then he unleashed his aura.

"BOOM."

A much more intense burst of energy shot forth from his hands, sending more of the monster's mass splattering in all directions. Some of it soared high into the sky, and then back down onto the deck of the ship. Stella Maris raised her head, frowning.

"It's just water!" She called to Jack. He didn't look at her or respond. He was watching the monster carefully, looking for any sign of weakness as it followed behind them as they trailed into the sky.

"That's great!" Sophie called. "How does that help us at all?"

Jack's eyes fell on the bottom of the creature. It seemed to be growing out of the water, like a tumor. And it was growing more and more.

"It's absorbing water from the sea to heal itself." Jack noted. Before he could expound on this observation, the beast attacked again, and he tried striking it, this time opting for fast, precise Aura Strikes. Shot after shot penetrated its form, sending splashes of water back into the sea below. Yet it did not flinch or react at all. The monster did not seem to have any vital spots that he could attack.

Sophie frowned, her brow furrowed, as she stared at the monster.

"A hundred years ago, Ctuhlthu was stopped when that guy rammed his ship into it." She said. "How exactly did that work?"

Stella Maris looked back at her. "Lucky shot."

“Yes, but what was lucky about it?” Sophie stressed. “Physical attacks aren’t working.”

Stella furrowed her brow. “We could try it.”

“You’re going to turn the ship around?”

Stella grimaced. “In a manner of speaking.”

She thrust her fists upward.

The trail of water suddenly took a sharp incline upward. The ship hit the incline, and at first began to sail up it as well as it ever had. But then the angle got sharper, and sharper, until the trail of water had suddenly become a ninety degree angle. The ship was hanging in there for a couple of seconds longer than it should have, and then fell.

The monster opened its maw to swallow them whole, but the sheer speed and force of the ship falling down on it caused it to explode. Water flew everywhere as the ship crashed back down to the ocean, the crew people using their magic to desperately re-angle themselves for the landing.

They crashed back down with force, the ship dipping far below the ocean surface before bobbing back up again.

“Did we get ‘em?”

The monster was already reforming some distance away.

“Damn!”

Jack turned to the monster and stared at it. The thing opened its mouth, and an intense blast of water erupted from it. He raised his hand and swatted it aside. It swerved away from them and into the ocean, where an explosion of water shot up into the sky.

“Hang on.” Sophie murmured. “It’s pulling water from the ocean, right? So maybe we should cut it off from the ocean.”

Stella Maris gave her an exasperated glance.

“We’re surrounded by water, Sophie.”

Sophie’s eyes flittered downward, onto the deck of the ship. The water looked perfectly ordinary.

“The Monster isn’t made of water…” Sophie said slowly. “It’s just surrounding itself with it. If we force it away from the ocean, it’ll have to take on its true form.”

“And how exactly will we do that?”

“You’re a Hydromancer, aren’t you? Think of something!”

Stella Maris bit her lip, clearly deep in thought.

Jack turned around to face them.

“Hitting it with the boat seemed to work.” He said. “Let’s do it again.”

Stella Maris stared at him, aghast, and then became angry.

“It’s a ship-“

Jack cut her off.

“Make me someplace to stand.”

And then he leapt off the side of the ship.

Stella Maris reacted instinctively. She raised her hand and a giant iceberg sprouted out from the ocean. Jack clutched onto to the side with his claw as he rose upward. The monster approached, its jaw wide.

“What the hell is he going to do?” Sophie asked in amazement, as Jack slid down the iceberg right next to the ship.

“What is he doing?”

The creature was approaching them. Jack found his footing at the bottom of the iceberg, turned around, and wrapped his arms around the ship.

Effortlessly he lifted the entire thing up and out of the water. Stella Maris hurriedly adjusted the size and shape of the iceberg to prevent it from slamming directly into the ship, as the crew around them desperately tried to find their footing.

“What is he doing?” Sophie cried out. She had almost slid over the side of the ship because there hadn’t been anything for her to grab. “Is he insane?”

Jack raised the ship high above his head, and then smashed it down on the monster.

BOOOSH

Waves of water erupted from the sheer force from the blow from the ship as Jack raised it back up and slammed it back down again.

BOOSH.

Despite the monster’s sheer size and overwhelming power, it was helpless against such a large weapon being handled so easily. Jack raised the ship up, again and again, and brought it back down, sending water splattering everywhere.

The creature shot some water outward, knocking the mast of the ship clean off. It fell down on top of the iceberg next to Jack.

He brought his hands back, and threw the ship at the creature. Every last bit of the water splattered everywhere as the ship plowed on through. The crew, all of whom were masters of Hydromancy, quickly got the ship under control.

“There’s no way that could have worked.” Sophie said callously, as they came to a stop. She brushed her hair out of her eyes and tried to hide the fact that her heart was racing a mile a minute. “It-“

“Diiiiiiiiiieeeeee!”

Sophie flinched as something leapt out of the water. She half expected to see a great leviathan rising from the depths. Instead a bright orange trilobite, perhaps about six inches long, landed on the surface of the iceberg, just above Jack.

“You dare defy me, mortal?” The thing demanded. “I am Oshus, the Master of this planet’s One Ocean! I was old when the dinosaurs first began to walk this Earth!”

Jack gave the thing a quizzical stare. “No wonder I couldn’t find any weak spots. You’re so small.”

“It is you who have grown large, mortal.” The trilobite Oshus continued. “Mankind believes itself to be invincible, but I, Oshus, am-“

Jack leaned forward and crushed the trilobite in his hands.

“FOOL!” Oshus cried, as the shell on his form broke. “This shell was my true prison! Behold my true power!”

A beam of energy shot upward into the sky. Jack looked up to see that the blue sky had been covered by a giant eye, its single pupil staring down at him with great dislike.

“I will devour this planet and all of its-“

Jack reached over, grabbed the mast that had been ripped off the ship, and threw it with such power and speed that it shot up and impaled the creature within its eye. It let out a cry of pain and agony as the creature exploded into a mass of black energy across the sky.

“I don’t believe it.” Sophie breathed, as the distinctive sparkling essence of a tear returning to the depths of space trailed away from the creature’s corpse. It had vanished entirely before it slammed back into the ocean. “Two hundred million years of being imprisoned, and this is how it all ends?”

“The inevitable fate of a Tear.” Stella Maris said. She groaned, and placed a hand on the side of the railing. She looked a little green. “Is to return to the Void.”

“But one that ancient, and that powerful?” Sophie asked. “You heard him. “He used to rule the planet’s single ocean.”

“And he was defeated by dinosaurs.”

The girls turned to see the Captain, a woman named De La Ray, or more infamously known as Captain R. She adjusted her hat as she stared out over the ocean.

“That thing’s story was always going to end at one crucial moment.” R said coldly. “The day it was killed by man.”

The girls looked at her, a little taken aback by this statement from the infamously brusque De La Ray.

“Hey, is it over?” Jack called out, over the side. “Can we have dinner now?”

“Best get your charge, miss.” De La Ray told Sophie, who scowled at her and made her way over to the side.

“It’s over!” Sophie called. “You’ve won.”

Five Fights Remaining

Avalon Anghel

Africa

“Of course it wasn’t strong.” Nightlinde said, annoyed. “The name of Oshus has been forgotten by the masses.”

“Come again?”

Nightlinde flipped her hair back, an obnoxious look of superiority on her face.

“Tears derive their power from the fear of living beings.” Nightlinde said. “They are dependent on our wayward imaginations and deepest fears to come to form. Oshus represented the fear and loathing of the deep sea from ancient creatures… most of whom died out a long time ago. Those that still remember him have learned to fear other gods. As a result, his power waned considerably over the past several millennia.”

“But last time he appeared humanity barely managed to contain him again.”

“That was before Tears were properly understood. Now that we know that they are made of Fear itself, we are not frightened of them. You yourself were not frightened, were you?”

“I was almost thrown overboard once.” Sophie admitted.

Nightlinde clicked her tongue.

“Because of Jack’s actions, yes? You were likely more scared of him than you were of it.”

That conversation refused to leave her mind for the rest of her stay in the village.

It was a while yet before her Mother approached her with another target. This time, she was looking unusually grim.

“You will be going to Africa.” She told her primly, as she set the dossier on the table. Sophie took the dossier and glanced at it. She gagged.

“A-Avalon Anghel?”

“Yes.” Lucille said, her voice grave. “He has betrayed us.”

“How?” Sophie asked, as she got to her feet, flipping through the folder widely. “He can’t have gone traitor…”

Avalon Anghel, being a High Knight of the Order of the Dragon, was a person of some importance. Not only was he a frequent sight at religious events, but a major target of gossip among the girls at the Academy. Their family had him over for dinner and everything.

“Anghel.” Lucille said. “Has decided that he wants to start another Crusade.”

Sophie looked up at her, shocked.

“A crusade?” She repeated. “Against who?”

“Against all those our Faith considers Evil in that region.” Lucille said. “Men and Monster both.”

“Define Evil.” Sophie said, as she turned her eyes back to the dossier.

“Ah, you have arrived at the root of the problem.” Lucille said. “Anghel believes that anyone who does not follow our specific denomination of Christianity should be purged. He believes that other practices are weak, and are leading mankind into ruin.”

“He’s not wrong.” Sophie told her bluntly.

“Other Christians are not our enemy.” Lucille stressed. “It isn’t practical for our cause to force our culture and traditions onto others. We must never antagonize them, Sophita. Doing so will inevitably lead to our ruin."

The conversation continued for quite a bit after that, mostly about Avalon and what Jack might encounter in their fight. Sophie found herself distracted. Not only was Avalon Anghel a High Knight of the Order of the Dragon, he was one of the four heroes who were instrumental in stopping the Mind of the Dragon. It hadn't been that long ago that he, Margaret Mire, Noire Nyx, and Hildegarde Justitia rose up against all odds and defeated the greatest threat to the Order in generations.

"Are you frightened?" Lucille asked her, clearly noticing her unease.

"No." Sophie said. She shook her head. "I don't… I don't like the idea of killing one of Margaret's friends."

She wiped at her eye and sniffed. Lucille stared intently at her. Sophie feared for a moment that she was about to be reprimanded, but instead Lucille stepped forward and wrapped her arms around her.

"I know." Lucille said, her voice gentle. "But you cannot allow sentimentality to get in the way of your duty."

Despite her reassurances, Sophie still found herself feeling a little bit apprehensive as she passed the information on to Jack.

"Our next target is Avalon Anghel." Sophie said stiffly, as she looked over the dossier. "He was born with 'Wings of Heaven…' an ability that drives away the unholy and wicked."

Jack snickered. "So we're doomed this time, huh?"

Sophie frowned. She was in no mood for his sense of humor.

"Dragons aren't considered unholy, so you should be fine." Sophie said. "But his magical power is intense. I doubt anyone you will fight is on the same level."

They were already on their way to their destination: Sophie still found herself not feeling entirely comfortable with the situation: Not only did they have to fight Avalon, but they would also have to deal with his followers. A handful of Knights in the Order had fallen in line with him, believing his cause to be justified. Sophie, being the

daughter of Lucille Langley, not only knew these people by name but in many cases their entire extended families.

It was the first time in her life that she was being asked to put someone she knew to the sword, and it unnerved her.

“I’ll rip this guy limb from limb.” Jack said happily, as he bounced around in his seat. Sophie felt her throat stiffen.

Avalon had built his little group in the middle of a warzone: All of the local warlords in the area had been eliminated, and he had replaced him as the defacto authority in the region. All of the people they met on the way warned them away, telling them horrible stories about his reign. Even the United States military had been unsuccessful in their attempts at removing him from power. In the end they found themselves driving along a long dirt road to their destination.

ENEMIES OF GOD, BEWARE

They passed by the sign by the side of the road without even slowing down.

“How arrogant of him, to assume that we are enemies of the Lord.” Sophie sniffed. All of a sudden she felt a sense that, regardless of whatever misgivings she might have, the man needed to be killed.

It was a rather well kept town. The buildings were made of a pure, angelic white that gave the impression of safety and warmth. The people milling about chatting were friendly, polite, and generous.

“Everyone’s so nice.” Jack asked, a little put off, as a little girl smiled and waved at them.

“Knowing Avalon, he’s probably providing his followers with everything they could possibly want to ensure their loyalty." Sophie murmured. Her eyes fell on the biggest, grandest building in the area. “Surely he has to be in the Church.”

They set off down the path. They made their way through happy, smiling people and came to a stop right outside the building.

Sophie had barely raised her hand to knock, however, when a soft voice hit their ears.

“Please leave the Church be.”

They turned to see a man leaning up against the side of the building, book in hand. He closed it with a snap and turned to face them.

“Miss Langley.” He said. “I can imagine why you’re here.”

She felt her breath hitch in her throat.

“Avalon…”

Avalon Anghel’s long silver hair had always been beautiful, as were the rest of his features. He seemed almost womanly in appearance, greatly resembling his twin sister Avelina.

“Do you truly think me a villain, Sophita?” He asked. “Do you truly believe that I deserve to die?”

Sophie opened her mouth to answer, but Jack cut her off.

“It doesn’t matter what she thinks.” Jack said shortly, as he stepped in between them. “I’ll be the one to kill you.”

Avalon looked at him.

“Very well.” He said formally. “I see the Church is more interested in obedient dogs than serving the truly righteous.”

He turned and walked away. Jack and Sophie stared at him, surprised.

“Are we going to fight or not?” Jack asked.

“Please, not here.” Avalon said. “I dislike involving my followers in unnecessary affairs.”

Sophie found herself unable to speak as Avalon led them away from the church, down the street and towards the border of the village. Plenty of people stopped to greet him, and Sophie felt her apprehension at the idea of having Avalon overwhelm her.

Jack, however, was staring intently at the back of his enemy with an intensity that honestly took her aback. It dawned on her that no matter what her own feelings were, Jack’s actions were completely out of her control.

They were led into a large, open field. There were no animals, few trees, and little greenery. Sophie found it rather grim and uninviting compared to the comforting warmth of the community.

“I can see you sense the danger.” Avalon said, as they came to a stop. He turned around to face them. “Africa is the birthplace of humanity. The blood of our ancestors has seeped into this land, more than any other. It is, by far, the most spiritually haunted continent on the planet. Ghosts, demons, and Tears are so well ingrained into the land that it is thought to be a part of the culture of the continent.”

Sophie said nothing. They had learned all of this in school.

“But was it not thought the same for the Noctis in Europe?” Avalon continued. “When Amaris Yew became the Dark Lord, was it not assumed that she would subjugate and control humanity? Was it not thought that Zeus and the other false gods of Olympus would rule this world until the end of time? And didn’t the Age of Chaos… the age defined by endless violence and strife… one day come to an end?”

“What are you getting at?” Sophie asked, her voice stiff.

“It is not impossible to save our ancestral homeland.” Avalon answered. “If we are willing to do whatever it takes."

Sophie couldn’t stop herself.

“You all have it figured out, don’t you?” She asked disparagingly. “Let’s just kill everyone on the continent, that will fix the problem.”

“You are very young.” Avalon told her. He seemed very much unbothered by her tone, which surprised her. He was very well known for being for being a stickler for proper decorum. “You have not seen how the rest of the world has held us back.”

She bristled.

“I commend your loyalty to the Order.” Avalon said quietly, his gaze fixed squarely on her. “I can see it in your heart how conflicted you

are about killing me. I know very well that you cannot leave here without making, at the very least, a genuine attempt at my life."

He held out his hand towards her.

"I am a believer in our faith." Avalon told her. "My convictions have led me down this path. Join me, and we can-"

"I'm not a believer." Jack interjected, before he could finish. "You're wasting your breath."

Avalon looked at him for the first time, and that familiar look of disgust crossed his face.

"I am well aware." He said heavily. "Those like you are driving our order into an era of pacifism. The very mindset that our forefathers sought to destroy."

He withdrew his hand.

"And now they have reached the point where they draw the sword against one of their most devout followers." He said. "Someday, Sophita… they may do the same for you."

"No one cares." Jack said roughly. He stepped in front of Sophie and glowered at him. "Are we fighting or not?"

Avalon stared at him.

"I have always wondered why we consider dragons to be such holy creatures." He said. "Most other cultures consider them malicious, or simple creatures of chaos. Yet we honor them as bastions of virtue and morality. The pillar of strength of our culture."

He bent over, staring at Jack intently. A pair of beautiful, pure white wings unfolded from his back, shining so radiantly that sun shining down on them from above seemed somehow diminished.

The wings folded again and he leapt upward. Jack punch forward, intending on knocking him out with a single punch, but Avalon sidestepped, both feet completely leaving the ground, as his wings propelled him forward. He reached brought his hands up, and a sword of light appeared in his hand just as he brought it back down.

The sword cut Jack straight through the chest. He staggered backward, looking surprised, as Avalon lowered the sword.

“You are not a knight.” Avalon said, his voice cold. “You are a dragon.”

He brought the sword up again. Jack tried catch the blade with his armored claw, but the sword penetrated it, stabbing right through his palm.

“Dragons are slain by knights.” Avalon said quietly, as he raised his hand and unleashed an intense blast of energy.

Jack took the blow, and would have slid backward if Avalon hadn’t kept him in place with the sword that had impaled his hand. He had no choice but to take the intense blast of energy point blank. A lesser man would have been disintegrated on the spot, but Jack managed to hang in there. He gritted his teeth, and pushed the palm of his hand further onto the blade.

Avalon could not pull away quickly enough. Jack reached his hand, and grabbed it. In a furious movement, he lifted Avalon straight into the air, and slammed him back down into the dirt.

To his surprise, however, Avalon flapped his wings once, and the sheer force of it killed the force of impact. He hit the ground gracefully, dispelled the Sword of Light, and replaced it with a bright gold shield that emanated from his palm. Jack's claw was forced away from his hand, and Avalon ripped it away, readying himself for another sword strike.

Jack, however, had always stepped forward for another punch. Avalon had to generate a shield of light to stop his head being punched clean off, but Jack's attack was so great that it cracked the shield, almost breaking it. Sensing danger, Avalon leapt back several feet, his feet trailing the ground, as Jack leapt after him.

"Keep your feet on the ground, idiot!" Sophie shouted, as Avalon gracefully leapt upward, and quickly came back down on Jack's head. Despite his graceful movements, the stomp was harsh: Jack topped to the ground, slamming his face into the dirt as Avalon rose back onto the area, and came crashing back down. The power from the second stomp was brutal. Jack felt his spine crack.

Avalon leapt into the air again for another attack, but Jack rolled over and raised his fist. He fired off a shot of aura, but it dissipated before it even reached its target.

"You idiot, he's a master of aura!"

Avalon came back down for another strike, but Jack rolled over. Avalon hit the ground, narrowly missing him, but quickly tried firing off a series of low kicks, trying to catch him off guard. Jack, narrowly, managed to avoid these as he leapt to his feet.

"The lady is correct." Avalon said. "Aura is energy of the soul. Such attacks are worthless against me."

His wings flapped once, to emphasize his point.

"You would have know that, if you had actually read his file." Sophie told Jack, annoyed, as he got into a fighting stance.

“But you’re not as strong as I am… right?” Jack challenged.

“A fight is not decided by who is stronger, but by who wins.”

The two stared at each other, and charged. Jack punched again, Avalon gracefully leapt out of the way, but this time Jack leapt after him.

“What did I tell you!” Sophie asked, exasperated, as Avalon easily avoid Jack’s upward punch, did a flip, and then kicked him in the head sending him crashing to the floor.

“He has wings!” Sophie shrieked. “What makes you think you can beat him in the air?”

Jack pushed himself up, and wiped away the dirt and blood with his claw.

“This is what I live for.” He said.

Avalon stared down at him, floating high above.

“You are not a coward.” Avalon said, at length. “But you lack true conviction. Do you truly believe that fighting and killing men like me fulfills some grand purpose?”

“What are you talking about?” Jack asked, annoyed. “I’m fighting because it’s fun.”

Avalon stared down at him, his eyes narrowed.

“You disgust me.”

Avalon raised his hand above him and a powerful sphere of energy began to be built up within it. It grew and grew in size, until it grew large enough for him to throw.

“Hro!”

Jack took a stance, reeled back, and slammed the ball with his fist. The ball exploded, and a variety of multiple rainbow colored streams of light burst out from it. They swerved around in a wide range of angles and attacked Jack. He tried blocking them with his own aura, but before he could even exert his own energy Avalon soared down, sword in hand, and slashed him, from his forehead to his pelvis.

Sophie screamed, raising her hands to her mouth as Jack narrowly avoided being split in half by swerving his upper half backward at an odd angle. Avalon, sensing weakness, darted forward and rammed him with his shoulder, sending him falling to the ground.

Avalon adjusted his wrist, and stabbed downward.

"Stop!"

Avalon froze. The sword's point came to a stop right before it could impale Jack's head. From above them, a white figure soared down and landed in between them. Avalon pulled away, his sword vanishing from sight, as the young woman glared at him.

"Brother." The woman said,

"Sister." Avalon acknowledged.

Not for the first time, Sophie found herself marveling how similar they were. Avelina Anghel was almost identical to her brother, with the same long silvery hair and the same wings. She was a little shorter, though not by much, and had softer facial features, but from a distance it would be difficult to tell the two apart.

"What are you doing?" Jack demanded, as he sat up. "This is between me and him."

Avelina ignored him. She looked angrier than Sophie had ever seen her. Her hair was billowing behind her, clearly bursting with magical energy as she surveyed her brother.

"Is this really what you want?" Avelina asked. "To betray the Order?"

Avalon spread his wings wide, clearly trying to intimidate her.

"The Order has become weak and secular. It has lost sight of its values."

Avelina widened her wings as well, mimicking his movement. Her wings were so much brighter than her brother's that Sophie had to shield her eyes.

"Your actions will kill us all!"

Avalon smiled grimly. "Not if I kill them first."

The glow coming from Avelina's wings brightened. Avalon found himself shirking back. Avelina smiled grimly.

"I see right through you, brother. You have allowed yourself to become wicked in the pursuit of your ideals. And what's worse is that you do not care."

Avalon grimaced. "On the contrary, I care very much."

"You are not fooling me, brother."

Jack got to his feet, brushed himself off, and stepped forward.

"Hey, babe." He said. "I'm going to fight him now."

Avelina didn't move. She was staring intensely at her brother.

"Out of my way."

Still Avelina did not move. Jack had to push her aside. She was so surprised that she let out a girlish shriek as she fell to the ground. One of her wings folded across her, rather like a blanket, as she stared up at him, shocked.

"Talking isn't going to finish this." Jack said, as he advanced on Avalon. "It doesn't end until he dies."

Avalon gave him a dark look.

"It fascinated me when I was told how the Eye of the Dragon killed several of our number, and yet was still was welcomed into our Order with open arms." He said. "It showed me just how much we have lost sight of our values."

He spread his arms wide.

"Those like you-"

He never finished his sentence because Jack managed to punch him in the face. He reeled, grimaced, and then flapped his wings to regain his balance. He swung a sword of light horizontally, that Jack quickly dodged.

"If it were not for my sister, you would already be dead." Avalon said, his voice cold. "Are you sure that you want to proceed?"

Avelina seemed almost ready to say something, but Jack cut her off. He raised his claws and jabbed forward, trying to cut into Avalon's body. Avalon sidestepped the attack, and struck.

He was much faster than Jack. He tried to block by instinct, forgetting that Avalon could cut right through his armored scales. He winced: it was an incredibly deep cut, one that might have taken his arm clean off if it had been at a better angle. He pulled his arm away instinctively, and once again Avalon brought the sword down on him.

"No!"

Avelina leapt forward, and with a graceful swing blocked the sword of light with her own.

"What are you doing?" Jack demanded, as the girl pushed back against her brother. "This is my fight!"

"It is not." Avelina said, her voice cool. "I will not stand idly by and allow this man to destroy you. You have done too much good to die here, Dragon."

"Good?"

For the first time Avalon looked angry.

"Stupid girl." He hissed. "This man is nothing but a bloodthirsty animal. A beast that craves only to rip and tear flesh for his own pleasure."

"Even beasts have their place on God's Earth." Avelina said. "You have blinded yourself to the goodness of this cruel world!"

He knocked her guard aside and she had to block again with a second sword held in her other hand.

"Beasts are beasts, and Man is Man! You should learn your place, sister."

They pulled their swords back and struck again. Sparks flew.

"My place is with the Order, serving it and our God with my very life." She said. "You believe that the Church should serve you."

They raised their swords and clashed again.

“Dearest Sister.” Avalon said coldly. “I am the last person I think of when I do what must be done.”

They raised their swords again, but before they could clash swords again Jack pushed past Avelina and thrust his hand forward. A surprised Avalon flinched as Jack’s claw tore right through his chest and out his back.

“Two on one, is it?” Avalon growled. To Jack’s great surprise he seemed to become intangible for a brief second and pulled away from him. Then wound in his chest already healing.

“Sir.” Avelina said, as Avalon became solid again. “Lend my thy sword.”

“I don’t have a sword.”

“No, I mean…that is to say…” She flushed. “Let us fight him together.”

Jack looked at her.

“You’re cute and all, but I’m doing this alone.”

“You haven’t a prayer without me.” She said. “Please, let me help you.”

Avalon spread his wings wide as he glowered at them.

“You would aid a creature like him?” He sneered. “To oppose me!”

Avelina leapt up. Rather than leaping towards her brother, she soared over to Jack. He flinched as she came up from behind him, and spread her wings wide.

“I will protect you from him as best as I am able.” She said.

Jack turned around and glowered at her, but she was steadfast. She hovered behind him rather like a ghost, her eyes straight ahead. Her eyes flickered down at him, and she smiled.

“The Guardian Angel.” Sophie murmured, her eyes on them. “But she seriously means to use it against her own brother?” The Guardian Angel formation was a method of strategy used by those

with the Wing of Heaven that put a major emphasis on guarding a point of interest, typically another knight, from unholy terrors. To see it used against another warrior with the Wings of Heaven was unusual, to say the least.

“Listen well, hero.” Avelina said to Jack. “Death comes for us all, but all I will do everything in my power to prevent yours for this battle.”

Jack grunted and turned away from her.

“Don’t get in my way.”

“You dare turn your sword against me, Avelina?” Avalon demanded, as he drew two swords of light.

They glared at each other.

“Have at you!”

Avalon charged at them. Jack automatically took a defensive stance, but to his surprise Avelina lunged in front of him. Two identical swords of light clashed with Avalon’s own, blocking them completely.

“Attack Attack Attack!” Avelina cried. Avalon quickly spun around, trying to throw Avelina’s blade off of his own, but before he could get back into position Jack caught him with a vicious punch.

He flew backward, stopped in midair, and then flew back, his blades of light whirling. Jack leapt forward, again looking to counter his blades, but Avelina beat him to it. They clashed again above him as he adjusted himself and hit Avalon again.

“Ugh!”

He staggered, his head reeling back. The blow had been so intense that he had spit out blood into the air. He recovered, snarling, his own blood covering his face, as he attacked again.

When Avelina blocked his next attack, Jack leapt forward and with a vicious stab, clawed his way into Avalon’s chest. He winced, deep in pain as Jack wrapped his hand around his heart and squeezed.

Avalon became intangible again, and Jack’s claw was suddenly gripping thin air. Jack pulled back his hand, expecting Avalon to

attack again, but instead he heard Avelina's voice in his ear:

"His intangibility is due to his mastery of his Aura."

Jack grimaced. "I'm still learning."

"Leave him to me when he transforms. Okay?"

The instant that Avalon reformed into physical form Jack leapt after him again, once again trying to rip him to pieces. When Avalon tried to defend himself two powerful golden beams of light shot from Avelina's hands, and he was forced to erect a shield to protect himself from them.

But this shield was intended to block aura and magical strikes… not physical ones.

Jack ripped right through the shield and grabbed hold of Avalon's neck. He struggled vainly before becoming transparent again… but in one fluid motion Avelina fired off another bright golden shot.

"Ugh!"

He returned to physical form… Jack grabbed him with both hands and began throttling him. Avelina stood over him, wings wide, staring down impassively.

"In the name of God…"

Avalon grimaced and placed his hand over the hole in his chest.

"If I'm going to Hell I'm taking you with me!"

He ripped the heart out of his chest and held it aloft. Avelina's eyes widened.

"May a fires consume ge tol!"

Beneath their very feet intense black flames enveloped them all. Jack felt an intense feeling of heat wash over him as his body was dragged downward, into the ground. Avelina spread her wings wide, as they descended, sinking into the ground.

"Stop this at once!" She cried. "May a tabaan blans ge tol!"

An intense burst of energy erupted from her wings, and for a brief moment the two of them stopped moving. But then they began to sink again, until the dark fire enveloped them completely.

For a moment they could see absolutely nothing. And then all of a sudden they were sounded by shrieks of pain by dying demons. Waves of fire erupting from the mountains in front of them, as gargantuan spiders walked on webs formed between their peaks, where giant predatory birds and insects were captured and devoured. The living trees before them were swaying back and force, the gaping mouths on their trunks hungry for blood.

“Where are we?”

Avelina took a moment to compose herself.

“Inferno.” She answered. “The Sixth Circle, I would say.”

Her wings on her back opened wide, and a bright shining light emanated from them both.

“Hell, huh?” Jack asked, as he surveyed the area with interest. “Soren got wrecked when Belladonna dragged him here.”

“He did not have my protection.” Avelina said, as a giant serpent like creature leapt out of the mountain’s fire and slid down the mountain. “Nothing will touch you as long as I am with you.”

“But how long will that be?”

Jack looked up to see Avalon Anghel staring down at them from above. His own brilliant white wings shone even more brightly than his sister’s.

“Holy Diver.” He crowed. “Abandon all hope! You have reached you final resting place.”

Avelina glared up at him.

“We have not been killed, brother. You drew us here.”

Avalon soared down closer to them and shone even more brightly.

“One does not go to hell for no reason, sister.”

Jack pointed a claw at him.

“What, beating you up is a sin now?”

“All non-believers end up here eventually.” Avalon said. “You should feel right at home.”

“Is there a reason you brought me here… friend?”

“Allow me to explain.” Avalon said smoothly. “My sister and I are pure souls. We shine so brightly down here that there is very little here that could actually harm us. You, on the other hand…”

“Are under my protection.” Avelina finished, raising her wings. “Do you honestly believe that I would leave him to burn in Hell’s Sixth Circle?”

“See reason, Avelina.” Avalon said. “It is his destiny.”

“He can repent!”

“You do not even deny that is he going to burn.” Avalon said contemptuously. “Yet you defend him still?”

“My purpose is to bring salvation to those in need.” Avelina said, her voice cold. “Hero!”

Jack glanced backward to look at her.

“You mean me?”

“This place is dangerous for you.” She said. “I will protect you as best as I am able, but we mustn’t stay here long. Already the Evils of this place are converging upon us.”

Her gaze hardened.

“But we must first put my brother to rest where he belongs.”

For the first time Avalon looked angry. Before he could speak, however, Jack lunged forward. He leapt upward to where Avalon was floating, but he simply rose higher. Jack grimaced, and turned himself into pure aura. He soared upward, past Avalon, and then reformed into solid mass. He spun around in mid-air, raised his leg, and brought it down on Avalon’s skull.

Avalon was slammed into the ground at full force, but at the moment of impact the ground itself seemed to explode. Waves of

fire and magma shot from cracks in the ground, shooting into the sky. Jack let out a cry as the flames enveloped him. Avelina waved her hand, dispersing them all dispassionately.

"This place is unlike the world of man." She said. "Take care… everything can kill you."

When the flames vanished, so did Avalon. Jack landed on his feet, looking around. Avelina frowned.

"He would not have been killed by such an attack." She said. "He is concealing himself."

"Or maybe something got him." Jack suggested.

"I think not." Avelina said. "By bringing us here he must think you are as good as dead."

"Could he have gone back?"

"To our world? Doubtful."

As they spoke the cracks on the ground began to split open further. Jack stepped back, expecting more bursts of flame, but instead giant insects began to scurry out, their pincers clicking threateningly. They swarmed the surrounding area… giving Jack and Avelina a very wide berth.

"You are fortunate that I am here." Avelina commented. "You would have been eaten alive otherwise."

The insects swarmed the area. Jack and Avelina stood and watched as they wave after wave after them rose from the cracks. Some distance away a large creature with glowing red eyes and chunks of lava running down giant ridges on its back let out a cry of pain as the ants swarmed it, snipping into pieces with their pincers.

"You sure that Avalon didn't get eaten?" Jack asked, as the insects swarmed the carcass, seemingly eating the creature alive.

"Very sure." Avelina answered.

A bright, brilliant light emanated from the cracks in the ground. All of a sudden, the flood of the Swarm came to a sudden stop.

“He couldn’t have killed them all.” Jack questioned, amazed.

“He could have.” Avelina said, her voice grim. “Our power is especially effective against demons.”

Jack took a step forward and peered into the crack.

“It is your decision whether or not to pursue him.” Avelina said. “I could draw you back now, if you wish.”

“I’m going after him.” Jack said immediately. “Are you coming with me?”

‘Of course.” Avelina said, sounding rather surprised that he had even asked. “I’ll be with you until the end.”

Jack leapt forward, and slid into the crevasse. The crack seemed to have split open to reveal a kind of tunnel… one that slid down deep into the ground.

Jack leapt into it and slid down. Avelina followed behind him, becoming transparent to fly through the ground itself close behind him.

He slid down for what seemed like miles until the darkness at the end of the tunnel gave way to a bright red light.

Jack slid into it, and then feel out into a large open space. All around them bright glowing ore seemed to pulsate with a sinister looking orange light.

“This mineral isn’t found on Earth.” Avelina commented, as she examined it. “Be wary of it.”

“You should be wary of me.”

Avalon rose up from the floor, his arms crossed, as he surveyed them.

“Without my sister, you would have been killed a long time ago.” Avalon said. “You can’t beat me.”

Jack took a step forward angrily.

“In fact.” Avalon continued. “I would say at this point I am mostly fighting my sister. You are letting yourself be outdone by a woman.”

Jack brandished his claws.

“Avelina.” He said. “Stop being my Guardian.”

“Wh-what?”

“He’s right.” Jack said, staring hard at Avalon. “I’ve been letting you take the lead for too long. I need to win this fight on my own, otherwise I won’t feel satisfied.”

“We’re in hell!” Avelina gasped. “You won’t last ten seconds!”

“Ten seconds is all I need.”

Avalon let out a sophisticated sounding laugh.

“Ten seconds?” He crowed. “You won’t even last five.”

Adelina was staring down at him with concern.

“Are thou certain?”

“Do it.”

Adelina bent her head.

“Very well.”

Her wings stopped shining.

Jack immediately felt an intense pressure through his entire being. He let out a pained gasp, realizing all too late that he could no longer breath.

Avalon laughed.

“Foolish!”

Jack let out a scream of rage and pain as the intense fires of Inferno enveloped his entire being. He stepped forward, the flames consuming him utterly, and grabbed Avalon.

“What are you-“

Jack used his own magic to empower the flames.

Avalon screamed. The flames that weeds enveloping Jack completely took hold of him as well, and in a matter of moments his arm had

turned to ash. The fact became charred and blackened, until it too burnt to a crisp.

In five seconds there was nothing left of his enemy. Even the Ash had burned away to nothing.

Jack barely registered the light gusts of air being pushed towards him by Avelina'a wings. He stood there, almost transfixed, as her power blew the evil flame away. The moment the flames dissipated she was there, wrapping her arms around him. She was crying.

"I cannot imagine the pain you must be in." She said. "But you did it." You killed my brother."

Jack took in a deep breath of air and cried.

Four Fights Remaining

Mulan Rouge

Vampire Knight

The Village of Dragons, Italy

"How is he doing?"

Avelina Anghel beamed widely at her. Belladonna scowled.

"Very well, thank you." She said. "I'm taking perfectly good care of him…"

"He's having no relapses. No nightmares?"

"He trembles in his sleep sometimes." Belladonna admitted. "But it's been getting better these past few days."

"An awful lot of strangers in OUR house."

The two looked up to see a grumpy looking Sophita Langley in the doorway, frowning at them.

"I sleep here." Belladonna told her, a little defensively. They had had this conversation before.

"You sleep with Jack, you mean." Sophie said. "That's no excuse."

Avelina clapped her hands together.

“I am here because your Mother called me to ease Jack’s suffering.”

“That’s a better excuse.” Sophie sniffed. “But I still don’t like it.” She stepped over to the counter and checked the tin. “Where’s my coffee?”

“Your father had the last of it last night.”

Lucille Langley was next to enter the room. Unlike her daughter, she was clearly wide awake. She had already dressed herself smartly in her bright blue dress suit. She rather looked like a lawyer prepping for her next big case.

“A pleasure to see you, Lady Langley.” Avelina said politely.

“Hello Ava.” Lucille answered. “You’re here early.”

“The Construct was just telling me that Jack was having nightmares.”

Belladonna shot Avelina a dark look.. She didn’t much like not being referred to by name.

“‘It’s true.” Lucille acknowledged, shaking her head. “But it has lessened in recent days.”

“Because of my hard work and diligence.” Avelina said.

“Yes, of course.” Lucille said. “Would you like to see him now?”

Belladonna stood up before she could answer. “I’m going too.”

Lucille gave her a cold look. But before she could speak Avelina answered.

“We would like that very much.”

Belladonna had to stop herself from smirking as she followed Avelina and Lucille up to Jack’s room. Lucille opened the door for them, and they stepped through. Avelina immediately made her way to his bedside, as Belladona stood awkwardly to the side.

“Please do not agitate them.” Lucille told her. Belladonna had to stop herself from scowling at her.

“Hello Jack.” Avelina said warmly as she bent over him.

His eyes flickered open. “Am I in heaven?”

Belladonna made an annoyed grunt as Lucille chuckled.

“No, but if you’re good you’ll get there someday.” Avelina said soothingly. “You are certainly no angel”

“Does that make me a bad person?”

“No, it makes you someone who hasn’t realized their potential.”

As she spoke she spread her wings wide. Beautiful white participant fell from her wings and onto his still body.

“Does anything burn still?”

“No.”

“But you still have nightmares?”

“No.”

“I was told otherwise.”

“I haven’t had them.”

Avelina glanced at Belladonna.

“It’s possible he doesn’t remember them.” She said. “They’re not as terrible as they used to be.”

Avelina nodded, and then turned to Jack.

“What do you want most, in the world right now?”

“To sleep with you.”

Belladonna choked, and took a step forward. Immediately Lucille drew her sword and blocked her off.

“Not one more step.”

Belladonna fell silent, her eyes flickering with a quiet rage.

“I can’t undo the damage the Inferno inflicted upon you if I’m asleep.” Avelina told him. “If I were to sleep here, it would not help you.”

“If I may, Ava.” Lucille interjected. “I think Jack is perfectly fine.”

Avelina looked up at her, frowning.

“But he said-“

“Are you ready for your next fight Jack?”

Avelina had to get out of the way as Jack leapt out of bed, did a front flip, and posed.

“Dork.” Belladonna said, smiling.

Avelina looked scandalized.

“But he mustn’t!” Avelina said, sounding shocked. “You’re still recovering!”

“I’ll get back to it after the next fight.”

“But-“

Jack walked past her right to Lucille.

“Who am I fighting?”

“Mulan Rouge.”

Belladonna looked up at her, surprised, but before she could speak Avelina was already speaking.

“The Vampire Hunter?” She said sharply. “She too has turned traitor?”

“Not of her own free will.” Lucille answered. “She has succumbed to her illness.”

Avelina deflated.

“Oh. I see.”

Her eyes hardened again.

“I could destroy her for you.”

“No, I want Jack to do it.” Lucille said. “It was Lady Rouge’s last request.”

“Is that true?” Belladonna asked, a little skeptical.

“We talked it over at length before she passed.” Lucille said. “She wanted Jack to reach his full potential.”

There was a heavy silence.

“My full potential, huh?” Jack murmurs quietly. He raised his hand and stares at it as it hardened into the scales of a dragon.

“You have already tapped into quite a lot of potential over the past year.” Lucille said. “But only by fighting strong opponents will you realize your true power. Mulan Rouge knew that, and wanted her last act for the Order to be to die be your hand.”

Avelina pursed her lips. She seemed to be pouting.

“If he gets into any danger I’ll step in.” She said.

Lucille considered her for a moment, and then nodded. “At my discretion, certainly.” She said. “Would you like to come along with us?”

“I would very much like that.”

“I’m going too.” Belladonna said, as the four of them made their way to the door.

“You get to watch me fight this time, huh?” Jack told her. As the four of them headed back down the stairs.

“About time.” Belladonna sniffed. “I should have been the one sent to deal with Kojack Fenrir. I would have made much shorter work of him than you would have.”

Jack laughed. “I’m sure you would.” He said affectionately. Belladonna tried not to let her pleasure show on her face.

The four of them passed Sophie in the living room. She was still dressed in slippers and looked rather sleepy.

“Where are you off to?” She asked.

“To Jack’s next fight.” Lucille told her. “You may take the day off.”

When the front door closed behind them, they heard Sophie’s jubilant cry of joy.

“Ah, yes.” Avelina said, turning around to face them as they left the house and made their way to the car. “You have fought a number of dangerous opponents now, haven’t you?”

“I’ve killed six.” Jack told her. “This Mulan Rouge chick will be the seventh.”

“Don’t be arrogant.” Lucille told him, sharply. “You have come close to death several times. I dare say most of the opponents you have fought were far stronger than you.”

“Yeah, that’s true.” Jack said, unperturbed. “But it doesn’t matter who’s stronger, right? What matters is who wins.”

Lucille nodded, mollified.

“You understand then, that your fights could have ended very differently?”

“They wouldn’t be much fun otherwise.”

Lucille smiled, and opened the car door.

“Today could be your last day.” Lucille said. “How would you want to spend if?”

Jack smirked.

“Exactly the way things are now.”

“Well said.”

They got into the car. The driver was separated from them by a thick sheet of glass. Lucille sat facing them, Jack, Belladonna, and Avelina, and procured a folder from her jacket.

“Sophie has told me that you dislike being told what to expect in your fights.” Lucille said. “However I am not in the habit of sending men to their deaths, so please allow me to break down who Mulan Rouge is.”

She opened the file and flipped it around. An image of a rather striking woman was staring back at them.

“Mulan Rouge was, before her conversion, a proud knight of the Order of the Dragon. Trained in Eastern Vampire Hunting techniques, she made a name for herself hunting down some of the most dangerous vampires in the world. She is what we refer to as an Alucard… a vampire that has retained enough of its humanity to

hunt other vampires. Mulan Rouge was famous for utilizing the vast resources at her disposal to maintain her humanity for an unusual amount of time. It was not until relatively recently… after her battle with the Eye of the Dragon… that she succumbed to her vampirism completely."

"She fought Soren?" Jack blurted. Lucille nodded.

"Yes, Mulan Rouge put up a much better fight against him than most." She said. "But she was on her last leg when the battle ended."

Jack sat back, crossing his arms.

"This will be the first person that Soren and I have both fought." He said, out loud. "Cool."

"I fought him too, remember." Belladonna said, annoyed.

"And I confronted him." Avelina said brightly. Belladonna shot her an annoyed look.

"And I beat him." Lucille said lightly.

"Am I the only one here who hasn't gotten to fight him for real yet?" Jack asked, frustrated.

The women laughed, as the car rolled along.

"Mulan Rouge is now a vampire." Lucille said. "The most effective method of killing her… for you, at any rate… is to go for the heart. It is the only organ that a vampire cannot repair through consuming the blood of others. The general tactic for most vampires is to wear out the opponent while keeping their own energy up by consuming blood. I would suggest finish this fight quickly, before she has the chance to get the upper hand."

"Is she still in possession of Amaris' Kiss?" Belladonna asked.

"Ah, I had very nearly forgotten." Lucille said. "She does."

"What is that?"

"It is a vampire sword." Avelina explained. "Made by embedding the essence of Amaris Yew into steel. It's back edge, black in color, is an

ordinary blade, but the red half can consume blood straight from the body upon contact. It also is known to cause hallucinations…"

"It was a sword that Amaris Yew gifted to her most trusted warriors during critical battles, and it has a long history of being used against our Order." Lucille said. "But Mulan Rouge claimed it for herself, and used it to great effect against our enemies in the Noctis."

"She used it against Soren?"

"She did." Avelina answered. "He had only just recovered from the hallucinations when I confronted him."

"So they aren't effective against a dragon?"

"Weeeelll…" Avelina put a finger to her lips. "His exact words were… "I'm married."

Jack gave her an odd look. Lucille had to elaborate.

"He was able to fight off the hallucinations due to his genuine love for his wife." Lucille explained. "You will have no such advantage."

"And what, pray tell, is that supposed to mean?" Belladonna asked scathingly. Lucille ignored her.

"By the sound of it I might have a tougher time of it than he did." Jack said. "He killed her at a distance, but my range game is nowhere near his level."

"That will be a factor." Lucille acknowledged. "But please remember Mulan Rouge is a true vampire now. Her behavior will have changed significantly upon transitioning. She is no longer the same person… or, truth be told, a person at all."

The car came to a stop outside of the Cathedral.

"Ah, here we are." Lucille said pleasantly. "Now… ladies… please wait for me in the observation chamber. I must lead Jack into the arena."

"Very well." Avelina said. She was the first to get out of the car. Belladonna hesitated somewhat.

"Don't die, okay?" She said. "I really like it when you stick your cock in me."

And she darted away to hide her embarrassment.

“A crude girl.” Lucille commented, once they were alone. “Truly I don’t see what about her appeals to you.”

“She’s fun.” Jack said. “Why did you marry Phil, then?”

“Because I love him.” She said simply. “Belladonna cannot have children, Jack.”

“Oh that’s good.” Jack said, relieved. Lucille gave him a dark look.

“Follow me.”

The two of them went into the Cathedral and headed down to the lower floors. Jack, who knew Soren was holed up somewhere deep within the dungeon below the Cathedral, was beginning to wonder if he would get the chance to see him. Instead, however, Lucille led him down a dark narrow passageway with no prison cells to speak of.

“In certain situations, we arrange for knights to do combat down here.” Lucille explained. “Today we will be using it to test your abilities in a controlled environment. It isn’t often I get the chance to see you fight... I am very much looking forward to it.”

“I wish you were guiding me instead of Sophie.” Jack complained, as they reached a large, thick iron door.

“As do I.” Lucille told him. “But you both have grown so much over the past few months. I am proud of you both.”

The great doors opened.

“Your enemy awaits you inside.” Lucille said. “Fight till the bitter end.”

As Jack stepped thronging the door, they swung shut behind him. The room ahead of him was pitch black, but his keen senses were able to pick up on the fact that he was not alone.

“Hello?” He called out into the darkness, as he stepped forward.

Immediately the surrounding arena was thrust into light by the flames of giant torches that simply sprung to life. There was nothing

in the room other than him… and her…

She was leaning against the far side of the wall, arms bound across her chest, her wild black hair fallen across her face.

“So the little dragon has come to play.” Mulan Rouge purred. She curled her bare toes on the stone floor and stared up at him. Her bright red eyes were wide and inviting. “I never realized you were so taken with me.”

“I don’t even know who you are.” Jack said. He sat down across from her and stared. “I’m not fighting until you remove those bindings.”

“I would if I could, sweetie, but I…”

She rustled her arms and shrugged helplessly.

“Help a girl out?”

“How old were you, exactly? Before you became a vampire”

“I was over fifty.” She purred. “Consuming blood is a wonderful anti-aging technique.”

“You look pretty good for someone who could be my mother.” Jack admitted. “But the maids in my Castle were way better.”

Mulan Rouge grimaced at him.

“Ah, you claimed Castillo Yew.” She said. “How is Kirumi? I hope you’re treating her well.”

“She was smiling pretty big when I slept with her.” Jack said. “She was in a good mood.”

“That’s good.” Mulan Rouge hummed. “She’s not known for smiling, you know?”

She held out her bonds to him.

“Help me unzip?”

“You vampires are the most sex crazed creatures I’ve ever seen.” Jack said, amused, as he raised his finger. A shot of aura energy erupted from his finger and hit the seal, blasting it apart instantly.

“Whew.” Mulan Rouge said, as she got to her feet and stretched, showing off her chest. “That’s pleasant. You know, you're a great guy. I wouldn’t mind spending the rest of my life with you.”

“You will.” Jack said. “I am going to kill you, you know.”

“You sure about that?” Mulan Rouge asked. “Can’t we… like… do it first?”

“By it you mean-”

Mulan Rouge, at lightning speed, reached for the sword strapped to her sword and swung it at him. Jack leaned back, avoiding the blow, and struck out at her chest. Her entire body became smoke, and Jack clutched at it in vain.

Mulan Rouge shot upwards, arcing somewhat above him, and slashes at his head with her sword. Jack deflected it with his arm, and to his great relief the scales deflected the sword strike.

Still, though, Mulan Rouge was on the attack. She moved downward and started slashing at his neck and chest. Jack, in a moment of inspiration, grabbed hold of the sword in his hand and yanked.

He had hoped to rip the sword out of her hands, but instead she was thrown straight into the ground. Because she has been falling head first, she landed flat on her head, and her neck snapped.

“You have got to be kidding me.” Jack said, as the body of Mulan Rouge lay limp on the floor. “That’s it? I want a refund.”

Mulan Rouge looked up at him. Despite the fact that her neck was completely broken she did not seem to be the worse for wear at all.

“You’re pretty good.” She said. She turned to smoke again and when she reformed she was on her feet. “Forgive me, this is my first fight as a vampire…”

“Vampires have more powerful forms, right?” Jack asked. “Transform into yours.”

Mulan Rouge suddenly lookers very awkward. She shifted her toes into the stone and glanced away from him.

“What is it?”

“I’ve never transformed before…” Mulan Rouge murmured. “I may not be pleasant to look at.”

“So?”

“Could you turn around?” She asked, batting her eyelashes. “While I figure this out?”

“Do you really think I would fall for that?”

“Yes.”

“Okay fine.”

Jack turned around.

“Hey, you’re not going to suddenly become super hot now are you-“

Mulan Rouge’s strong. Powerful fingers wrapped around his neck. Her jaws descended on hm, her sharp fangs aching to taste blood.

Jack raises his fist and punched her in the face. She reeled backward from the sheer force of the blow.

“You’re not very good at being a vampire, are you?”

Mulan Rouge releases him and backed away, licking her blood red lips.

“Forgive me, sir.” She said, as she pawed at her lips with the back of her hand. “I don’t know what came over me…”

“Your lust for blood, that’s what.” Jack said. “I don’t see any true form.”

“I’m trying my best, okay?”

In the Observation Chamber, Lucille, Avelina, and Belladonna were staring down at the proceedings reflected through a pool of water.

“What’s going on?” Belladonna asked. “She’s better than this.”

“Sometimes vampires take on characteristics from the one who fed on them.” Avelina answered. She was watching the proceedings with great interest. “I suspect she’s becoming more like Amaris Yew.”

“Yew isn’t nearly this flighty.” Lucille told her, her eyes fixed on Mulan’s movements. “I dare say that Mulan Rouge genuinely has no idea how to best use her new powers.”

“Look.” Rouge said, as she clasped her hands together. “Tell you what… why don’t you LET me bite you?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Come and take it for yourself.”

She leapt forward, and let out a cry as Jack punched her again. This time she flew through the air, and slammed into the far wall.

She peeled herself away and glared up at him, her eyes glowing a vicious red.

“What was that for!”

“I wasn’t just going to let you take it.”

Mulan rouge hissed at him, and then crawled up the wall like a lizard. She reached the top, climbed onto the ceiling, and hung by her legs, watching him.

“You make a habit of being a creepy shit?” Jack asked her, as he paced back and forth below her.

“Only for the men I like.” Mulan Rouge said, as she began to swing back and forth. She looked very much like a bat.

“So why are you doing it to me?”

“Because I like you.” Mulan Rouge said.

“I really doubt that.” Jack said warily, as she swung back and forth, her eyes fixated squarely on him.

“It’s true.” She said. “All I can think of right now is taking a big, meaty bite out of you.”

“All I can think about is ripping your throat out.”

“Oooooh, harsh.” She said. “What, you don’t like vampires?”

“I’ve been with twelve of them.” Jack said. “You’re just not my type.”

“A girl’s true worth lies in her soul.”

“Do you even have one?”

She raised her hand and beckoned him.

“Why don’t you come to me and find out.”

Jack groaned.

“Look, lady, I’m not interested.” He said. “Are we going to fight or-“

He let out a cry and glanced down. The blood red blade of Amaris Yew was protruding from his stomach.

“Fool!” Mulan Rouge cackled, as the blood that had been drawn from his impalement soared up through the air towards her. She opened her mouth wide, as his blood entered her mouth. She let out a moan, closing her eyes as she rocked back and forth.

Jack grabbed the sword by its hilt and ripped it out, throwing it aside.

“Should have seen that coming.” He said.

Mulan Rouge moaned again, running her finger across her lips.

“Jack, you’re DELICIOUS…”

She opened her eyes again, licking her lips.

“I was just kidding before. But I REALLY want you now.”

Jack didn’t answer her. The moment he had been stabbed he had begun to feel a little bit lightheaded. He had assumed initially that it was simply due to being impaled, but now that he had it removed he realized that was simply not the case.

Normally, his powers would have closed the wound immediately, but the very nature of the vampire blade, which hampered blood flow, slowed the process considerably. Although he stood tall and strong, the wound was actually quite severe.

And that was not even getting into the strange hallucinations.

“Hello Jack.” Amaris Yew purred. “You’re cute.”

“You’re not half bad yourself.”

“What’s happening?” Belladonna demanded, as Jack let out a small smirk.

“Amaris Yew’s influence.” Lucille answered. “The wound was severe enough to hypnotise him. And Jack doesn’t have the strength of mind to resist her.”

“He’s proven himself far stronger than his opponent.” Avelina pointed.

“Ah, but the stronger man doesn’t always win, does he?” Lucille asked. “Men are often taken in by beautiful women.”

“So?” Belladonna asked. “He should just tear her apart.”

Lucille shot her a sour look, and Avelina looked appalled.

“Your lack of true humanity is showing through.” She sniffed. Belladonna had the sense to pretend to look ashamed.

Jack stood there, enraptured, at the figure of Amaris Yew.

“I understand that you have laid claim to Castillo Yew.” Amaris said. “Well done. I am much happier seeing it in your hands than that cretin Fenrir.”

“So you’re Amaris Yew.” Jack said. “You’re prettier than I was told.”

“How are Kiryu and the others?” Amaris inquired. “You are taking good care of them, I hope?”

“I didn’t have to kill them, if that’s what you’re asking.” Jack said. “I’m not paying them or anything, though.”

“Oh, they have no need for-“

SCWOOP

Jack looked down. The blade of Amaris Yew was again sticking out of his stomach. He had not even noticed Mulan Rouge coming down to retrieve it.

She stood baring her teeth up at him as he stared vacantly forward. Amaris Yew smiled at him.

“I cannot wait until I return home.” She said. “Take care of those girls for me, will you?”

Jack grimaced, as Mulan Rouge smiled.

“What’s wrong?” She asked sweetly. “Too tired to move?”

Jack grabbed the hilt of the sword and again tried to rip it out, but Mulan Rouge’s enchanted vampire strength kept it firmly entrenched where it was.

“I must say I’m surprised at how much you are struggling.” Amaris Yew said to Jack. “When I fought Mulan Rouge I stripped away her very humanity….”

Jack blinked, and soon felt Mulan Rouge’s lips pressed against her neck. In a fit of blind rage and fury, he threw his own head forward and big her instead.

“That‘s one way to do it” Lucille said, amused, as Mulan Rouge let out an intense scream of pain. She flailed around, trying to throw him off her as Jack clenched onto her neck with his teeth.

“You certainly are an interesting one.” Amaris noted, amused, as Jack’s teeth broke her skin and drew blood. “Careful. Our blood is toxic to humans.”

Mulan Rouge managed to twist her neck and catch him on the shoulder. She bit into him, and an intense feeling of pleasure flowed through him.

“Feels nice, doesn’t it?” Amaris asked, as Jack raised his fist and punched Mulan Rouge with all of his might. Her teeth ripped off the skin on his shoulder she went spinning through the air. Jack almost went after her to follow up on the attack, but when he took his first step he realized how dizzy and unsteady he was.

He reached down and again ripped out Amaris’ Kiss, but instead of throwing it aside like he did last time he tried to break it in half with his hands. Amaris watched, amused.

“That isn’t going to work.” She said, as the blade bent out of shape, and then sprung back into its previous form almost immediately.

Frustrated, Jack took the hilt of the sword and swung it wildly. His grip and stance was weak and awkward… despite his intense training, he had never used a sword before in his life. There had never been a need.

Mulan Rouge came to a stop and turned to face him, still floating in mid air. She let out a hiss, showing off her bloody fangs. Jack raised the sword and threw it at her. She raised her hand and caught it.

She shuddered slightly, composed herself, and then smiled rather beautifully.

"Wow, thank you so much! It's just what I needed!"

She spun around in a wild circle and charged at him, the blood red blade of Amaris Yew spinning with her. Jack stood completely still watching as she came towards him. The blade came down on his head, and he blocked it with his arm.

The blade bounced harmlessly off as Jack leapt upward, striking Mulan Rouge across the face. She spun through the air, before coming to a sudden halt and slashing at him again.

The movement was so unnatural, and so unexpected, that Jack took the slash across the chest. He took the blow, and the blood that spurted out of his chest was absorbed into the sword Mulan Rouge let out an orgasmic laugh as his blood seeped into her.

Jack fell to the ground with a crash as Mulan Rouge gracefully landed on her feet. She licked the blade clean as she surveyed the scene.

"Oh, poor baby." Amaris Yew cooed. "Is she too much for you?"

Jack sat up, grimacing, and tried getting his bearings. The hallucinations were getting worse. His head was spinning, and he almost felt as if Amaris Yew was watching him from all directions.

"Lie down and die." Amaris Yew commanded. Jack ignored her, and crawled to his feet. He staggered a little.

"Ooooh you're still raring to go." Mulan Rogue giggled. "I like that."

She raised the sword and advanced on him.

“Should I step in?” Avelina Anghel asked anxiously. She had already opened her wings, causing Belladonna to shirk back, hands covering her eyes from their bright glow.

“No.” Lucille said. “Let him struggle.”

Avelina shot her a look.

“If we wait any longer he may be killed.”

“He may.” Lucille agreed, her tone neutral.

Avelina gave her a doubtful look, and lowered her wings, folding them back into her back. Belladonna lowered her hand, letting out a sigh of relief.

Mulan Rouge brought the sword down on Jack’s head again, but he swerved out of the way. He couldn’t even see her properly at this stage… all he could see was the image of Amaris Yew laughing at him.

“Shut up….” He said. “I’m trying to fight.”

“Rude!” Mulan said, as she brought the sword down again.

Jack caught the blade in his hand. Mulan Rouge barely had time to react as he brought up his claw, and in one smooth movement punched through her chest, tearing through her heart. She let out a gasp of surprise as Jack ripped it out, and held it aloft, as she staggered backward.

“Ooooh, you don’t want to crush that.” Amaris Yew said. “Just throw it away.”

Jack, without even thinking, tossed the heart away.

“Idiot.” Belladonna seethed. “What is he doing? He could have killed her right there!”

“He was probably compelled to do it.” Lucille said, her eyes narrowed. “Look at him. He’s not even fully conscious.”

Jack staggered a little as he turned to face Amaris Yew.

“You’re next.” He said to the hallucination, his arms swaying back and forth.

“Is that so?” Amaris asked. “I must admit I am intrigued by you, dragon child. Perhaps if you survive… we shall one day meet.”

“Survive?” Jack repeated. “Not much is a threat to me.”

And Amaris smiled.

“I am.”

“Ugh….”

Mulan Rouge let out a moan as she clutched at her chest. She reached for her heart, hand outstretched, and fell to her knees. She reached for her heart, and a trail of blood began to seep from it. The strands of blood hardened, and pressed against the floor. The heart walked on its legs of blood towards her, and back into her chest.

“Ugh.”

She let out a deep gasp of her and grimaced. She stared down at the still gaping hole in her chest and placed her hand over it. A red wave of blood covered it, sealing the entire thing shut.

“That isn’t-“

“It is.” Lucille said. “Hemomancy.”

Avelina shot a look at Belladonna. Out of the three of them she had by far the most experience with it.

“Blood magic.” Belladonna said. “Amaris Yew isn’t known for using it, though.”

“But Mulan Rouge herself was.” Lucilla said. “She used mild forms of Hemomancy to prevent her blood from being preyed on by the vampires she hunted. Her vampirism must have increased her powers.”

Mulan Rouge wriggled her fingers. Thick red strands of blood came out of her chest and waved in front of her, rather like the tentacles of an octopus.

“Or perhaps her powers were enhanced by feeding on Jack.” Belladonna suggested. “If she already had these powers to begin with…”

Mulan Rouge threw her hand forward, and the blood in her chest soared forward. The tips of the strands hardened into spikes as they impaled Jack, in between his forearms and biceps and on his knees.

Jack winced as the blood spikes latched onto his veins, and with a vicious series of pumps Mulan Rouge pumped her own blood into him.

"Vampire blood isn't compatible with living creatures." Belladonna said grimly, as Jack let out a scream.

"Vampire blood is black, though." Avelina said thoughtfully.

"Vampires must consume red blood in order to survive." Lucille said. "I suppose that Mulan Rouge is simply using the blood she ingested from Jack… before it was digested into being the black blood of a vampire."

"What difference does that make?" Avelina asked.

"Vampire blood… or venom, as it's more commonly known… being injected into a victim in that way would begin the transformation into a vampire." Belladonna explained. "It's way more dangerous than normal blood…. No, the blood she's using is human. It has begun the vampirism process, which is why Jack's body is rejecting it, but it isn't nearly as dangerous as true vampire venom."

Jack screamed out in pain.

"That's a good thing." Belladonna clarified. "Vampire Venom is supposed to feel pleasurable to its victims."

"You know an awful lot about poisons, Construct." Avelina said, sounding impressed.

Belladonna smiled grimly.

"Poison runs in my blood."

Jack pulled his arms back, trying to rip the cords of blood out of his arm, but Mulan Rouge hung firm. She pumped more of her contaminated blood into him, and he let out another screech of pain, doubling down on his attempts at freeing himself. The cords

tightened, and stretched. Jack twisted his body and brought his claws down on either side, severing the connection.

"Ugh!"

He bent over to sever the cords on his ankles as well, but Mulan Rouge was upon him again, this time planting her teeth on his neck. He let out a scream as her venom entered his bloodstream… the blood spurting out of her chest formed into a great sword, and stabbed him through the heart.

Avelina winced, and even Belladonna gave a small start. But Lucille stared impassively down at them.

"Do or die." She said.

Jack raised his hand and pushed with all of his might against Mulan Rouge's face. She grimaced, biting deep into his neck to stay in place, but in the end the skin on his neck simply ripped off, showing off the flesh underneath. Jack used the freedom of movement to twist his head and head butt her.

She cried out as the blow smashed her straight into the head and reeled back. The solid blade of blood that had impaled Jack kept her from flying away.

Jack reached for the solid red mass, grabbed it, and shattered it in his grip. A sharp piece came off in his hand and he raised it upward, bringing it down on her head.

"What is he, retarded?" Belladonna exploded. "Just rip her heart out, it's not that hard. "

"He's not lucid." Lucille said. "He's barely conscious, see? Look at all of those unnecessary movements."

Jack staggered a little as Mulan Rouge reeled back. More bleed seeped out of her head and chest, and more of the strands shot toward him.

"That isn't a very effective use of Hemomancy." Belladonna said, as Jack knocked them away with a shield of aura. "Just form them into weapons, it isn't hard."

“Maybe you should get down there and fight him.” Lucille teased her.

“We’d probably just end up having sex.” Belladonna said.

Lucille was about to chide her, when Avelina cut in.

“What’s sex?”

Jack staggered forward, swatting aside the strands of blood with waves of aura emanating from his hands. It seemed as if he could barely stand. But he manages to close the distance between them, and in one smooth movement punched through her head clean off.

“Nooo, that won’t work.” Belladonna moaned as Jack turned away, rubbing his claws. As she spoke, the head of Mulan Rouge turned to smoke and reformed untouched right on top of her neck… as if nothing had happened at all. “Her heart, go for the heart!”

Jack swung his claws wildly in all directions, clawing at Mulan Rouge’s chest and waist. Large, deep cuts were made on her body, and more blood seeped out.

“Never make a Hemomancer bleed MORE.” Belladonna moaned, as Mulan Rouge wrapped her arms around Jack’s neck. The large cuts on her body exploded into thick red spikes, impaling him at a variety of angles. Jack let out a trickle of breath, as blood ran out of his mouth.

Mulan Rouge kissed his cheek.

“Hurts… doesn’t it?” She purred.

The spikes of blood retreated back into her body and Jack stood, completely still, as Mulan Rouge stepped around him, smiling.

“Hold.” Lucille commanded, and Avelina bent her legs, poised to spring:

“If I wait any longer, he WILL die.”

Lucille said nothing as Mulan Rouge walked around her target, still smiling.

“So strong.” She murmured.

And the. Jack breathed out.

“Are you…?”

Mulan Rouge stopped in place, staring at him intently.

“What?”

“Kill me and you will simply be executed.” Jack rasped. “You have no chance of survival once I die.”

Lucille leaned forward, intrigued, as Mulan Rouge considered those words.

“I will escape this place.” Mulan Rouge decided. “With my new powers…”

Jack let out a hollow laugh.

“You can’t even use your True Form.”

Mulan Rouge narrowed her eyes.

“Perhaps.” She said slowly. “I should try.”

She raises her hand and grimaced. An intense wave of magics energy protruded from her. Jack stood completely still as the stone walls behind him shattered and broke into pieces.

“Aaaaaaaaah!” Mulan Rouge screamed, as her body began to twist and writhed. Her bones twisted and bent to become longer and thicker, the skin shifted from a lovely white to a sickening green, and her eyes began to glow red.

Her new form was disgusting. Bright red in color, her demonic visage was disgusting.

She stood over him, and laughed.

“You see, Jack?” It crowed. “My power is great enough to destroy this very Cathedral, if I wish it! Your blood will fuel a new-“

Jack punched through her chest. Mulan Rouge gasped spitting out blood as Jack ripped out her heart, and then then crushed it in his hand.

“What?” Avelina was taken aback. “What just happened?”

“Vampires aren’t stupid creatures.” Lucille answered. “Mulan Rouge must have realized that even if she killed Jack here she would almost certainly be killed while making her escape. He baited her into taking on her True Form by making her think about how it could help her escape from this place.”

“But how did doing that help him?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Belladonna’s lip curled. “She stopped being hot.”

“You see, Avelina.” Lucille said. “Jack was by the far superior fighter, right from the start. But Mulan Rouge’s vampire Allure kept him from dealing the finishing blow. Although A vampire’s true form is technically far more powerful…. By transforming into a monster she lost her only real advantage against her male opponent.”

“Oh, wow!” Avelina breathed. “How cunning.”

Belladonna was frowning.

“Cunning isn’t how I would describe him.” Belladonna said. “That move… that is something I would have done.”

“Perhaps you are the only reason he survived today, Construct.” Lucille said.

She was off before Belladonna even registered what she said.

“He doesn’t look well.” Avelina said, her voice concerned, as she phased through the floor. In a matter of moments she was swooping down on Jack from above. She ran her eyes over him, gave a small start, and then pushed him over.

By the time Belladonna got down there she was crying, her face strained. Lucille was standing over her, looking grim.

“Now that you have eliminated the poison, all that remains is to restart his heart.”

Lightning flashed from Avelina’s fingertips. Jack’s body gave a sudden lurch. Belladonna snickered.

“Nice.”

Avelina ignored her. She bit her lip and pressed down again.

“WHUP.”

This time Jack sat up, looking surprised at all of them.

“What….”

“You died.’ Lucille told him, smiling. “For about five seconds, at any rate.”

Avelina looked relieved. “Oh, thank goodness.” She breathed. “I was so worried we would lose you…”

“There goes my night of beauty sleep.” Belladonna said.

Lucille raised her sword and smacked her over the head with the hilt. She reeled, staggered, and then held her head, frowning.

“Please refrain from being so vulgar in my presence.” Lucille said. “Avelina, I want you to continue looking after Jack in the near future.”

Avelina clapped her hands together.

“Oh, good. Perhaps he can teach me all about sex!”

Lucille Langley thought it best to change the subject.

“You fought very well, Jack.” She said. “Only one last thing remains to be done.”

“What’s that?”

“What would you like to do with Amaris’ Kiss?” Lucille asked. “As you defeated its previous holder, it is yours to do with as you wish.”

“I have no need of it.” He said. “Lucille… would you like to have it?”

“You would gift it to me?” She asked. “Why?”

He smiled at her.

“Sometimes I feel like I haven’t done enough for you.”

Lucille smiled back at him.

“Very well.” She said. “I will take it and use it to the best of my ability. Thank you.”

Three Fights Remaining

Sonechka Asamova

Psychic Professor

Grey Arcadia, America

Sophie was loathe to leave the village of Del Drago after her all too brief holiday. She had been given a brief moment of respite from having to deal with Jack's nonsense, and had half an opportunity to pursue her passion of doing absolute nothing. However, duty called her back to the field and she, grudgingly, had to once again pick up the file of their next target.

"Dr. Sonechka Asamova… The Psychic of Grey Arcadia."

"A professor of the study of psychic powers." Lucille corrected her. Sophie rolled her eyes. She was certain that her Mother held a certain respect for a fellow academic.

"I thought she was a witch." Sophie said, as she flipped the pages of the folder. She had read some of Asamova's writings during her days in the Knight's academy to better understand the applications of psychic powers in battle.

"She is technically an apprentice witch… she never was contracted by her master."

"Why?"

"She can serve him better as an influential member of the university." Lucille said. "She can push naïve young girls to him, and handle delicate political situations that true witches would call for blood over. She is very important to his presence in the university."

"Why does she need to be killed?"

"Her research is reaching a critical stage." Lucille said. "When the Soviet Union fell, a large portion of the ground breaking research revolving psychic energy was lost or destroyed. Ever since she fled Russia she's been slowly compiling it back up to where it was. If we are not careful, Grey Arcadia could become the forefront of Psychic research in the world. It would not be long before the American government began abusing such power."

“Is she a government agent as well, then?”

“Oh no.” Lucille said. Her lips tightened. “But many of her students will be.”

“I doubt Grey Arcadia will appreciate us killing one of their renowned scholars.” Sophie murmured, her eyes running over the document. “Especially if she’s about to make a major scientific breakthrough…”

“They will not.” Lucille said. “Please be wary.”

And so, Jack and Sophie found themselves on a plane back to the United States.

“This Sonichu-“

“Sonechka.” Sophie repeated, annoyed. “Dr. Sonechka Asamova. Show her some respect.”

“I can’t help but notice…”

Jack tapped the photograph with his finger.

“She’s cute.”

“She wouldn’t be interested.” Sophie said flatly. “She’s an academic… an intellectual. She wouldn’t give you the time of day.”

She snapped the file with the photograph away from him.

“Besides, you’re supposed to kill her.” She snapped, as she ruffled the file. “Don’t go thinking that you’re going to sleep with this one.”

The old lady sitting across from them give her a startled look, but she huffed and returned to reading her file.

They touched down on the East Coast of the U.S. The University of Grey Arcadia was not far from where they landed, but it was dark by the time they arrived. They spent the night at a hotel, and the very next morning set off for the university.

“We don’t want to spend the night there.” Sophie said, as their car drove them along. “Please be sure that she’s dead by sunset.”

“Why?”

Sophie stared straight ahead.

“Grey Arcadia is enemy territory.” She said quietly. “It is a place controlled by our ideological counterparts. Evil from all over the world travels here to get its degree. Staying there for any length of time is dangerous… even for us.”

“Sounds fun.” Jack said. Sophie scowled at him.

They stepped out into the street filled with people and creatures of all shapes and sizes. Green lizards with three heads sat at diners eating meals prepared for three, witches openly made blood sacrifices to their patron demons in the street, and men with giant swords clashed to cheering onlookers.

“Holy shit.” Jack said. “I wish I went to college here.”

Sophie rolled her eyes as they made their way down the street to the Psychic Science building.

They arrived at a surprisingly modern American looking establishment. Compared to the gothic European architecture of its surrounding, the rather flat, boring looking building stuck out like a sore thumb.

“She works here?” Jack asked, clearly put off.

“Were you expecting a sorority or something?” Sophie asked him sardonically.

The two of them stepped up to the front door and Jack raised his hand and punched through the solid glass. Sophie couldn’t help herself. She laughed.

“Nice.” She said. “The University isn’t going to like that.”

The woman from behind the desk blinked at them through square rimmed glasses. Sophie could tell at a glance by the eyes and the little bat wings sticking out of her head that this was a witch.

“Can I help you?”

Jack and Sophie stepped up to the desk.

“Yeah.” Jack said. “I’m here to kill Dr. Asamova.”

The woman gave him a cold look and reached under the desk. Flashing red lights filled the room, and out from a small alcove in the side emerged a giant. Perhaps seven and a half feet tall and just as wide, he towered over them both and seemed to be made of nothing but raw muscle.

"Get out." He said hoarsely.

Jack didn't even turn to look at him as he reached a hand towards his neck. Jack raised his closed fist and an intense blast of aura blew his head into dust. The man's giant body staggered slightly, and then fell with a thud powerful enough to shake the building.

"I won't ask again." Jack said. "Where is Asamova?"

"Uh, this way sir." The woman said, gesturing to the side.

Jack looked, and the woman leapt up, knife in hand. She swung it at his neck with incredible force, and upon contact with his skin it bent harmlessly. Sophie watched with a smug feeling of satisfaction. Doubtless the Noctis were not used to such blatant disregard for their authority on their own territory.

The woman stared at the knife, open mouthed, as Jack gave her a cold look.

"I warned you."

The woman cried as Jack grabbed hold of her, and with an incredible threw her into the elevators doors. She slammed into them, bending them wildly out of proportion, as Jack and Sophie walked up to find her.

"Which floor?" Jack asked, as Sophie pressed the button.

"…The fifth…" She managed to breath out.

The door opened, and the woman fell backward halfway into the elevator. Jack and Sophie stepped around her into the elevator and peered at the buttons.

"Was she telling the truth?" Jack asked.

“Who cares?” Sophie said irritably. She pressed the button to the fifth floor and the doors started moving shut. The woman let out a gasp as her head was caught in between the two doors. She struggled vainly, as the elevator began to rise.

She was lifted off the ground, and once they hit the next floor her head was severed from her body. It rolled to their feet and stared up at them, looking horrified.

“How could you do this to me…?” It moaned. Sophie brought up her foot and stomped it, crushing it outright.

“Typical witch.” She sneered. “Do evil unto others, but lament thy fate. Go fuck yourself.”

Jack laughed. “I’m rubbing off on you, huh?”

Sophie grimaced, brushing her hair with her fingers. “Of course not.” She said. She self consciously rubbed her foot onto the elevator floor, trying to wipe the blood away.

They stepped out of the elevator and found themselves standing in the middle of a hallway.

“Where on the fifth floor, exactly?”

“Do you want to split up?” Jack asked.

“What are you, stupid? This is Grey Arcadia… I’d be killed, or worse.” Sophie said. She cast looks back and forth, considering their options.

“Just knock on doors until we find someone who can help us.”

“Sure.”

They walked to the first door and knocked.

“What?” An irritable voice said from the other side.

“Dr. Asamova?”

“No, you idiot, that was a man’s voice!” Sophie hissed.

The door opened. The glowering face of a giant witch that looked rather like a bullfrog stared down at them with wide, bulging eyes.

“Humans?” The thing cackled. It’s long, frog like tongue shot out towards Sophie. She let out a cry as it connected to her waist, and she found herself being dragged to its mouth…

SWISH!”

The bullfrog screamed in pain, covering her mouth as Sophie fell to the floor, cursing wildly. The tongue that Jack had cut off flopping uselessly beside her.

“Gross!” Sophie exclaimed, as she drew her sword and used it to pry the remains of the tongue off of her. Jack shut the door in the bullfrog’s face and turned to the next door.

This time an intense flame burst out when they knocked, and the time after that they opened the door to find a dead body hanging from the ceiling. When they looked at it, the eyes began to glow and the thing shrieked at them.

“You would have to be insane to go to school here.” Sophie said in disgust as they moved to the next door.

They opened the next door and found themselves in a small, homely looking office. There was another girl sitting behind the counter. Bright orange cat ears stuck out on the top of her head, and they bent slightly as they approached.

“Uh, can I help you?”

“Just get us Dr. Asamova.” Sophie said, annoyed.

“Do you have an appointment…?”

“Yeah.” Jack said.

The girl’s ears bent backward, and she hissed.

“Liar.” She said, showing off a pair of fangs. “Get out, or I’ll call security.”

“Let them in.”

The girl gave a surprised start and turned to the intercom in her little office. She pressed a button and tucked her hair behind her ear.

“Doctor, I don’t think these people can be trusted….”

“They can’t.” The voice said, sounding amused. “But I will see them, regardless.”

The girl scowled as she sat up and looked at them.

“Dr. Asamova will see you.” She said stiffly. “Proceed through the next door and take your first right.”

“Thanks.”

They went through the door.

“She seemed nice.”

“She was about to rip your head off.”

“Yeah, and die trying.”

They reached the final door and opened it. A single woman sat in a chair on the other end of the room.

“Jack… and Sophita Langley. A pleasure.”

“I’ll say.” Jack said, his eyes running over her. She was even more beautiful than her photograph suggested. Sophie rolled her eyes.

“We don’t have all day.” She snapped. “Kill her before it gets dark.”

Asamova tilted her head at them and tapped her pen against her clipboard. She was, Sophie surprised to see, still quite young. She had almost hoped that the picture they had on file was outdated. She was not much older than Jack himself, but the difference in them was striking. She was well educated, smartly dressed, and clearly in her element.

“There won’t be a need for that.” Asamova said smoothly, as she raised the pen. “I admit defeat.”

Jack stared at her.

“Huh?”

“I have become uncomfortable with the current state of things at this university.” Asamova said. “I wish to defect.”

“Don’t fall for it Jack.” Sophie said immediately. “She pulled the same stunt when she left the Soviet Union.”

Asamova smiled at her.

“You are knowledgeable, aren’t you?”

Sophie blushed.

“You are not wrong.” Asamova said. “I defected from the Soviet Union just before the collapse… I was nine years old. My priorities then were to salvage the research that had been conducted on my psychic powers. I took everything I could and fled to this University, where I have remained ever since. But things change.”

“Such as?”

“Your people are right to fear my research.” She said. “A highly trained psychic can stimulate and bring out psychic powers in others. It isn’t like your magic, which is hereditary… psychic powers can be nurtured.”

“Magic isn’t hereditary-“ Sophie began, but Asamova continued as if she had not been interrupted.

“I have worked to streamline this process for future generations.” Asamova said. “When I first came to this country, I had hoped to become an ordinary American girl. But the university pressured me to come here, and contribute whatever I could to their research. Within a decade I became top academic in my field.”

She sounded intensely bitter.

“I always knew, one some level, that this isn’t what I wanted.” She continued. “But what choice did I have? It was either this, or be turned in to the Sentinels.”

“Is there a point to this story?” Sophie asked, her voice irritable. “Regardless of your regrets in life, you have done evil.”

“Perhaps it is not too late, for me to start again…” Asamova murmured. “If only I was given a chance…?”

She gave them a look.

“Rip her heart out, Jack.” Sophie said, as Jack took a step forward.

“You would fight me?” Asamova asked, unmoving. “I have done nothing to you, and my work is already finished. Killing me will accomplish nothing.”

Jack raised a clawed hand.

“Oh, very well.” Asamova said, as she closed her eyes. “I very well thought it would come to this.”

Jack struck at her, swinging his fist around in a sort of haymaker. She stood there, her eyes still closed, as his fist approached her.

She opened her eyes and looked into his own.

In a flash Asamova found herself far away from the scene of their battle. Far away from Grey Arcadia, far away from her home in America. She found herself in the deepest recesses of Jack’s mind.

“I may as well get to know this man before he kills me.” Asamova said, as she stepped lightly down the corridors of his sub-conscious. One could divine a lot from the mere self image that a person’s mind depicted, and Asamova’s expert evaluation was that Jack’s was one of the most simple minds she had ever encountered. Most minds had entire labyrinths and layers of memories, personas, and fantasies. But Jack’s mind only had a single floor, and one that was not particularly complicated. A number of hallways connected to each other in a seemingly endless loop, and they led into nearly compartmentalized rooms that seemed only to depict his base interests and needs.

Her first order of business was to find his own inner self, and to question him. She was surprised to find that it was a woman.

“Hello there.” Lucille Langley said, smiling widely, as Asamova stepped into the room. Asamova stared at her warily, unsure of how best to proceed.

This was not the real Lucille Langley, merely Jack’s interpretation of her. Still, however, Asamova spoke to her with extreme caution.

“Good evening.”

Langley tilted her head and stared at her. Asamova could tell that Jack did not exactly know how Langley would react to this situation. She was exceptionally beautiful, Asamova thought, surely more beautiful than she was in life… but curiously not sexualized. She looked sophisticated and respectable, which led Asamova to conclude that Jack had nothing but the highest respect for her.

"You do not belong here, Sonechka." Lucille spoke, her voice soft. "This mind is not yours to do with as you will."

"I do not desire to destroy your mind." Asamova told her, speaking more to Jack's sub-conscious than to the projection of Lucille herself. "I merely want to live."

"Live?" Lucille repeated. "You live, while your actions cause countless others to die?"

"It is not my responsibility how my research is used." Asamova said, her voice firm. "If I could, I would stop it, but-"

"But?" Lucille repeated, her voice cold. "You knew what your work would lead to before you even began."

Asamova stared at her, the wheels in her head turning. This couldn't be Jack's opinion of her own actions… no… it was her own….

She snapped back to reality and turned to look at Sophita Langley. Jack stood transfixed, still staring at her completely transfixed. Sophita stood behind him, her hand outstretched, her brow furrowed in deep concentration.

"You are no psychic." Asamova said, trying to hide her amazement behind a humorous tone. "You planted that image of your Mother in his mind using magic."

Sophita grimaced.

"Better than letting you have your way with him." She snapped.

"Perhaps it is your mind I will destroy first." Asamova said.

And then she was in Sophita Langley's mind.

This was much more ordinary, Asamova thought to herself, as she stared around the vast, endless fields in front of her. Everywhere she looked she saw reflections of Sophie's personality… the people she respected, the training she undergone, her struggles with her faith, and the boys she liked. And when she finally found Sophie's sense of self, she could tell at a glance that it was her real one this time.

"Oh, hello." Sophita said, beaming, as Asamova approached her. She was laying her head in the lap of a boy who did not seem to have a face, which Asamova suspected meant that she didn't have a particular interest in any one person at the moment. Her inner self was oddly relaxed and peaceful. Her mind did not seem to be aware that it had been infiltrated.

Asamova kneeled down and sat in front of them.

"Lovely weather we're having." She said conversationally. "It sure is a nice day to take a break from work."

"A break?" Sophita asked, with a laugh. "What are those? I'm a Knight of the Order of the Dragon… I don't get to take breaks."

Her expression softened somewhat.

"Well… I got to take one when my Mother was available to take over for me…" She said. "I'm… thankful for that, I suppose."

Asamova felt a strange surge of guilt. The girl wasn't all that different from her, in a way. A part of her didn't want to be here either. She wanted to be at home and getting to know the local boys, not traipse around the planet with a bloodthirsty dragon going after threats to her faith. Still though, she steeled herself.

"It's good to be thankful for the little things." Asamova said to her, smiling. Sophita smiled back disarmingly.

"I just wish… I could take breaks forever, you know?" She said. "Why did I have be born into the Order…?"

She shook her head, silencing herself. This, apparently, was her default reaction to her own sense of self doubt… to bury it by reminding herself of her duty. Asamova felt sympathy for her.

“You don’t have to be a slave to your religion.” Asamova said. “If what you truly want is to be free… then, perhaps, that should be what you should pursue.”

She paused, licking her lips slightly,

“What… we should pursue.”

They sat in silence for a few moments, deep in thought. Asamova wasn’t sure on how best to proceed. She found herself completely unwilling to break Sophita’s mind, even though she easily could. There was too much of herself reflected here.

If I want to change…

I can’t just kill her.

“Sleep on it.” Asamova said, as she got to her feet. “And I’m sure you’ll find the right path for yourself.”

She was back in reality. Asamova watched as Sophie’s eyes fell, and she crumbled to the floor. Jack blinked at her, still looking a little bit dazed.

“Wha- what happened?”

Asamova smiled and stroked his cheek with her hand.

“Nothing.” She said quietly. “Nothing at all.”

And then she was back in his mind. This time with no resistance from Sophie, she should be able to find Jack’s true sense of self this time quite easily. His mind was an open book to her now, without Sophie’s interference.

She simply walked through whatever barriers his mind managed to put in front of her and came to a stop right aside a door.

“Oh Jack…” A young woman said from within, with a blissful sigh. Asamova flushed, rising her hand to her mouth as she backed away, turning her head to the side. Perhaps his mind was too much of an open book.

She went a little further into his memories, taking notice of every critical moment of his life. Lucille, it seemed, was someone he held

in high regard. Women like Margaret Mire and the Witch Construct Belladonna appeared as well, and for the briefest of moments she saw her own face reflected in his mind. He wasn't really certain that he wanted to kill her.

"So you are not a heartless killer after all." She murmured, bending her head.

Lucille Langley's face replaced her own.

"You have one purpose, Jack." She said. "To fight for our Order."

Asamova stared at her.

"Is that why he's doing this to me…?" She murmured quietly. "Just because he was told to?"

Disconcerted, she ventured deeper into his memories. She saw how Jack first encountered Lucille, how he awakening the Dragon Within, and how he left his life of normalcy behind to become one of the most dangerous men in the world.

"But who were you before that…?"

She found herself in a small and dingy hospital in a third world country, clearly from the east. A small, Asian woman was laying on a table, grimacing.

"You need to kill this thing, doctor." She rasped. "It will be the death of me."

"Yes, yes, you have mentioned this to me before." The doctor said, sounding annoyed, as he turned back to her, large needle in hand. "Abortions are a perfectly safe procedure…" He smirked. "Well, for the Mother, anyway."

He tottered over to where the woman was lying and raised the needle. Asamova barely had time to wonder just what any of this had to do with Jack's past when a bright blue claw shot out of the woman's stomach, grabbed the man's wrist, and ripped it off.

The man screamed, holding his bleeding stump in his hand as the thing ripped itself out from its mother.

“B-bastard…” the woman gasped, before her head slumped over in a dead faint. The doctor stumbled around, flailing, reaching for a handgun that was lying on the table as the thing slid onto the table, blood secreting everywhere. The doctor aimed a shaky hand at the creature, and fired.

The bullet slammed straight into its head, and bounced right off. It let out a giggle.

Asamova watched, horrified, as the doctor was ripped to shreds, unable to defend himself. She felt bile rise up in her throat as she stepped backward, trying to reach a lighter part of his mind…

She found herself watching as Jack met Lucille Langley for the first time. She could see how the knight had made such an impression on him. Not only did help him escape punishment for a crime that he did not commit, she set him on the path that he would walk until his dying day. Lucille, in a way, was more of a Mother to him than his real one had been.

“It really was the best day of my life.”

Asamova turned to see Jack’s sense of self staring down at the scene before them.

“I can see that.” Asamova said gently. “She gave you a purpose.”

“Before that I had nothing.” Jack said. “I never realized that my talent for hurting people could be useful… could be desired.” He clenched his hand into a fist. “I thought I was useless. And maybe, outside of the Order, I was.”

“I don’t think that’s true.” Asamova said. “I can see that many women have loved you.”

Jack gave a short laugh.

“Love?” He repeated. “The word means nothing to me.”

Asamova gave him a forlorn look as she turned back to the scene before them.

“You’re a broken person.” She said slowly. “You believe you are living your best life, but you are well on your way to tragedy. Violence

against your enemies is all you take pleasure in."

"Broken?" Jack repeated. "You would have me return to where I was before?"

"I did not say that." Asamova said. "We all grow and change, but you-"

"I haven't changed." Jack said quietly. "I've always been this way."

He wasn't lying. A sense of self couldn't lie.

"What's changed." Asamova prompted. "Is that you feel that your talents serve an actual purpose."

Jack bent his head. His eyes were closed. "Yes."

"Is that why you want to kill Sonechka Asamova?" Asamova pressured him.

"I don't want to kill her."

"Why?"

"I want to have sex with her."

Asamova laughed.

"Well, that's something." She said. "Perhaps you aren't as much as a mindless killing machine as you believe yourself to be."

"I am." Jack. "I am… I am…."

He sounded uncertain of himself. Asamova touched his arm.

"Why do you fight?" She asked quietly.

"Because I must."

"You have a choice." She said gently.

He turned to look at her.

"Did you?"

She faltered a little bit.

"I thought I did." She acknowledged. "I wanted to be a therapist… when I first started to go to school here. But… doing something like that was beyond me." She smiled ruefully as she stared down at the

scene before him. Jack and Margaret Mire were busy fighting in an arena, surrounded by people. Despite the intensity of the fight, a good time had been had by all. “Have you ever felt like that?”

“There was nothing else.” Jack intoned, his voice dry. “Before I met Lucille, I had nothing.”

“There was a girl.” Asamova pressed him. “Rose.”

“Yes.” Jack said tonelessly. “A girl.”

Asamova turned back to the scene before them. Margaret had been declared the winner, and in that exact moment Jack had felt like he had fallen in love.

“I do not want to fight you.” She said. “It is not in my interest to do so. I wish to live a life of peace.”

“Lucille asked for you to be killed.”

She closed her eyes and sighed.

“I know.”

“Asamova must die.” Jack’s sense of self said.

“There is nothing I can do to get you to forgive me for all that I have done?” Asamova asked, her voice a little bitter.

“Nothing.”

“Very well.” She said quietly. “Let my death be quick and painless.”

She found herself back in her room in her building staring down Jack. His fist was raised upward, and in a brief moment it would cave in her face.

Her eyes were closed, awaiting the blow. She waited for about ten seconds, and when the blow never came she opened her eyes. Jack was still looking at her.

“Why do you hesitate?” She asked. “It’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“I wanted a fight.” Jack said. “Why won’t you fight?”

She folded her hands in front of her and stared at him.

“I have no desire to.”

“Don’t you want to live?” He demanded. “Don’t you want to finish your work?”

“No.”

Jack stared at her. He lowered his fist. From behind him, Sophita Langley was clambering to her feet. Her eyes were bleary.

“We’re done here.” Jack said shortly, as he turned and walked away. Asamova watched him go as Sophie turned back and forth, trying to get her bearings.

“Wha-“ she blinked. “But Jack… she’s still breathing!”

“She’ll be more miserable if we keep her alive.” Jack said shortly. “That’s punishment enough for her.”

Sophie got her bearings and moved to cut her off.

“Stop!” She commanded. “I order you to-“

She squeaked as Jack grabbed her by the scruff of her neck and threw her over his shoulder.

“Mother will hear about this!” Sophie cried, kicking her feet. “A pox upon you, Sonechka Asamova!” She cried, as she pointed a finger at her. “Thy suffering will be greater than you could possibly-“

Thinking quickly, Asamova stepped out behind them before Jack could close the door in her face.

“Take me with you.” She said.

Jack turned around to look at her.

“Why?”

Asamova shrugged. “Why not?”

Jack gave her a look and then laughed.

And just like that she left her old life behind and started a new one.

Two Fights Remaining

Ryuko, the Dragon of the West

The Strongest Woman in the World

Japan

"This is not the result I had in mind." Lucille Langley murmured. "Jack is testing my patience."

"I know, right?" Sophie said, thankful that for once that her Mother was taking her side in the argument. "I begged him to kill her, but he just-"

Sophie made a violent gesture with her hands and Lucille nodded, her voice grim.

"I have spoken to him about it." She said. "I dislike how he ignored your authority, when your orders were very clear. But perhaps…. Jack acted in our best interest."

"Best interest?" Sophita repeated. "She was born in the Soviet Union!" The Order of the Dragon had no love for Russia.

"If our intelligence is to be believed, her work had reached its natural conclusion." Lucille said. "There was no stopping it at this stage. The best we can do now is bolster our own psychics."

Sophie groaned. "The Order doesn't have a good history with Psychics, Mother."

"Perhaps." Lucille said. "But we cannot simply tie ourselves down with tradition. We must grow and evolve with the times."

"Allowing Russians into our ranks is asking for trouble." Sophie said. "Especially if they have ties to the country."

Lucille smiled at her knowingly.

"You are beginning to sound like Avalon Anghel." She said. Upon noticing Sophie's outraged expression, she amended her statement. "That was not an insult. It is a good thing to hold to and value our culture and traditions, but not to the extent that we allow them to control us. Avalon's belief that we should prevent outsiders from entering the faith was not without merit… his concerns at its core were no different than your own."

The conversation was beginning to be a bit too heavy for her liking. Sophie decided it was time to change the subject.

“Who’s next?”

“Ryuko.”

Sophie went pale.

“The strongest woman in the world?”

“At one point.” Lucille said, as she slid the file over to Sophie, who took it gingerly by her fingertips. “In the 80’s. She has retired to a life of demure peace in Japan.”

“Peace?” Sophie repeated, as she flipped through the files. “She’s…. like… a housewife now?”

“She enjoys gardening and music.” Lucille said. “And has sworn off the sword.”

“If that’s true, why does she need to be killed?”

“Because her very existence is a threat.” Lucille said. “Her very existence has led Japan to an era of prosperity and peace. The demons of Chidori dare not venture near her, and the Americans dare not pillage Japan while she still draws breath.

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

“It has led to the Japanese becoming fat and lazy sitting on their own wealth.” Lucille said, her voice cold. “They are essentially a vassal state for those who control America… Japan is already in decline. And Ryuko has allowed this to happen. Her power and influence could have easily saved the entire country, but she chose not to use it. She must be eliminated.”

Sophie stared at it, her lips dry.

“Very well.” She said faintly, as she folded up the file. “I’ll… go tell Jack.”

She stood up and made her way to the door. She bit her lip and then turned around.

“Could I have a new dress ready for his funeral?”

She found Jack that day sitting with Belladonna at the coffee shop.

“I don’t like that Sonechka woman.” Belladonna was saying. “She-“

“Time to go.” Sophie told Jack.

Jack got up without another word, ignoring Belladonna’s protests.

“Jaaaaack.” She whined, as she tried to grab hold of his sleeve. He ignored her, pushing her off of him as they made their way out.

“Who’s our next target?” Jack asked.

“You mean who’s your next target.” Sophie said immediately. “I’m not going within fifty miles of her.”

She flipped open the file and showed it to him.

“Ryuko, the strongest woman in the world.” Sophie said. “She-“

She stopped when she noticed Jack staring rather intently at the photograph. She scowled.

“Don’t tell me you want to sleep with this one too.”

“Of course not!” Jack snapped.

Sophie flinched at the surprising venom in his words. Her knees buckled. For a fraction of a second she truly understood that she would never be able to stand up against Jack in battle.

And then the moment passed.

“Well I certainly wouldn’t be surprised the way you’re going.” Sophie sniffed. “Avelina, Belladonna, and Asamova are all fighting over you.”

Jack turned away from her, crumbling the file into a ball in his fist.

“Hey, we need that!” Sophie said, alarmed, as she tried to pull it away from him.

They headed off to Japan that very night. Jack was unusually moody and silent. The flight felt longer than usual and Sophie found herself alternating between napping and watching movies.

They touched down and Sophie immediately found herself struggling to navigate. She was fluent in several languages, but not Japanese, so it took them quite a while to leave the airport and find a hotel.

They spent the night there as Sophie tried, desperately, to figure out just how to get to their destination.

In the end she managed to find a route, and after a small breakfast they took a car out into the countryside. The Japanese City melted away into the rural countryside.

“Whenever people speak of Japan they’re usually focused on the cities.” Sophita commented. “But the country is beautiful.”

Jack said nothing. He stared out of the window as the car rolled along.

They came to a stop outside of a large compound. A cute little traditional Japanese garden awaited them as they entered. A running stream of water ran into a small pond, where live koi swam around in circles.

“Charming.” Sophie said, genuinely impressed. “I’d want to live here.”

“No.” Jack said, his voice cold. “You wouldn’t.”

Sophie opened her mouth to reply, but before she could the door to the house slid open.

A Japanese woman, perhaps about twenty years old, peered out at them.

“You… are killers, yes?”

“From the Order of the Dragon, yes.” Sophie said. “Is your Master home?”

“She will not see you.” The woman said stiffly. “Leave now.”

Jack put his hand on his hip. “Tell her Jack’s come to see her.”

The woman blinked at him.

“Jack?” She repeated, puzzled. “I…”

And then a voice came from the house.

It was a woman’s voice, but so deep and sinister that it sent a chill down Sophie’s spine. It was the coldest voice she had ever heard.”

“He may enter.” It said, in perfect English.

Jack stepped forward.

“I’ll wait here.” Sophie said anxiously. “And… Um, protect the garden.”

Jack did not turn around as he climbed the stairs to the home. The Japanese woman bowed him inside as Sophie turned around to admire the garden.

Jack found himself in a dimly lit hallway in the home. The door slid shut behind him, and he was left in the darkness.

He stood there silently as a haunting melody began to sweep over him. It was an unnerving, otherworldly tune.

And then she began to sing.

Jack’s face was stoic as he walked forward, the dark music growing louder and louder as he made his way further into the house.

He slid open the door and looked inside.

A woman sat kneeling on the bare floor in front of him, surrounded by nothing other than the walls around her. She strummed the instrument in her hands, a biwa, with practiced ease. To other ears the dark music may have been considered elegant.

“Hey Mom.”

One of the strings on the biwa snapped. The music came to a stop. The woman took in a deep breath.

“It is you.” Ryuko said. “I hoped I was mistaken.”

She cradled the biwa in her hands and glanced down at it. She did not seem to look at Jack at all.

“You have come to take my head.” She said. “I did everything in my power to give you a normal life, and this is how you repay me?”

She stood up, and still cradling the biwa, carried it to the side of the room and set it gently against the wall.

“You weren’t exactly a great mother.” Jack said.

She turned around to face him, and glared. For a brief moment Jack recalled just how much he had hated that look.

"I should have killed you when I had the chance." She rasped.

"You could kill me now."

Ryuko threw her head back haughtily and glared at him.

"I have sworn off my sword a long time ago." She said. "I do not wish to stain it with your blood."

A shadow crossed her face.

"But… I suppose… since I brought you into this world…"

She raised her hand and instantly, in a burst of lightning, a katana appeared in it.

"I will remove you from it." She finished, as she drew the sword and trailed it across the ground in front of her, staring intently at him.

They lunged at each other. Jack raising a clawed fist, and Ryuko her sword. They clashed, and the sheer force of the blow blew the room apart. The walls around them shattered blew away from the sheer force of their magic, but both of them remained standing.

Ryuko grimaced as she glanced down at Jack's arms.

"The Dragon Within?" She repeated. "You?" She grimaced, pressing the blade further down into his fist. "There was no saving you."

She lunged at him with surprising speed, and to Jack's very great surprise her fist connected with his fist, knocking him clean off of his feet. He spun wildly outside down as Ryuko pulled her sword back and slashed out at him.

Jack barely managed to block the attack, but when he did Ryuko kicked out at him. Jack went flying backward, rolling along the ground. He tried leaping to his feet mid roll, but Ryuko was upon him. She slammed her foot down onto his head, and he slammed back into the floor.

She swung the sword at his neck, intending for a quick decapitation, but he spun around and attacked her knees.

She crumpled slightly, and her swing narrowly missed his neck. He leapt to his feet and turned to face her, only to find her slashing wildly at his face. He dodged each strike, his fist clenched, trying to find an opening. He opened his palm and struck out, the blades on the tips of his fingers intending to gash a hole in her side.

She swerved out of the way, and brought the sword down on the claw. Jack cried out in surprise: The blow drew blood.

He pulled away from her and they stared at her.

"If I had been in my prime." Ryuko said, after a pause. "You would not have that arm now." She swung the sword in front of her. "Is that the first time you have been cut?"

Jack licked his lips. "No."

"You are not invincible." Ryuko said quietly. "Did you think you could come here and kill me, even weakened as I am now just because of what you are? I daresay you are quite mistaken…"

Jack threw a punch at her, and she dove forward, bringing the sword back for another vicious swing. Again she struck at the claw, intentionally this time, and this time the cut ran even deeper. Jack grimaced, blood spurting out of his arm, as he tried to strike out at her with her other arm.

"You have no proper technique." Ryuko observed, as she effortlessly blocked the punch with her elbow. She knocked him aside and slashed at his chest, causing a deep gash across it. He stumbled backward, clutching at his chest with a gasp. "Were you even properly trained?"

Jack grimaced. "By Lucille Langley."

Ryuko narrowed her eyes.

"I've heard the name." She said. "Foolish woman… you would have been better off dead."

Jack found his footing. He glared at her hatefully.

"Don't speak of her like that." He said. "I respect her more than anyone."

“Respect?” Ryuko repeated. “You respect her, for wasting her time training you?”

“Yeah.” Jack said. “She’s like… the Mother I never had.”

Ryuko glowered at him. An intense, evil energy emanated from her. Jack could hardly bear to look away from her.

“You have grown into everything I feared you would.” Ryuko said. “Someone who takes pleasure in the suffering of others.”

Her sword crackled with lightning energy.

“You are a monster.” She said. “I take no pleasure in taking your life, but it must be done.”

She raised the sword and a bolt of lightning shot out from it, penetrating Jack through the heart. Jack again staggered, taking a step backward.

“That would have killed a lesser man.” Ryuko said. She shook her head, and then corrected herself. “It would have killed you if you were fully human.”

Jack smiled at her.

“Can’t admit that you’re wrong…?” He rasped. “That’s just like you…?”

Another shot of lightning followed, and Jack again staggered. He gritted his teeth and glared up at her.

“You’ll need more than that…” He growled at her.

She grimaced.

“Age has caught up with me.” She said. “You should be dead.”

She blasted him again, and again he stood and took it.

“Ugggggggggghhhh…”

She raised the sword again.

“Doubtless even you can survive this next strike.” She said. She brought the sword back again.

Jack converted his body into aura and the shot harmlessly passed through him. Ryuko's eyes widened.

"Nani?"

BAAP.

Jack hit her so hard across the face she went flying. Through the remains of the walls they had already destroyed and into the neighboring room, slamming so hard into a wooden pillar that it snapped clean in half. She spun around in mid-air as Jack, again in a lightning streak of aura, raced over to where she was and appeared above her. He spun, and with a great powerful kick sent her flying into the floor. She spun around wildly, trying to regain her balance, and barely managed to land on her feet. She crashed into the floor so hard that it split the floorboards into pieces.

Jack fell down on top of her, and they clashed again. Ryuko bent her knees, getting into a better position, and then quickly managed to grab his arm and throw him into the ground. In the same movement she kicked up the splintered floorboard, and it impaled him through the chest.

Blood exploded from him like a fountain as she whirled around, kicking out at the splinter, and gently adjusted it. Jack gasped as the splinter shifted around inside of him… neatly cutting into his internal organs.

Ryuko finished her pivot and come to a stop as Jack gave a lurch of pain.

" Omae wa mou shinderu ." She observed, as he struggled wildly to try and free himself. "You cannot win, boy."

Jack grimaced and ripped the splinter out with his claw. He tore bits of his own flesh to more easily reach it, and tossed it aside. He yawned and scratched his cheek.

"Are you even taking this battle seriously?" Ryuko asked quietly, as Jack sat up. "I was not kidding. You will die here."

Jack yawned. Already the wound on his chest was sealing itself shut. Ryuko pursed her lips, staring at him intently.

“Do not think yourself invincible.” Ryuko warned him, as she brandished her sword. “Dragons can be slain.”

“I don’t think you have the guts.” Jack said.

Ryuko narrowed her eyes.

“You’ve had twenty five years to kill me and never even really tried.” Jack said. “Why would you do it now?”

In response Ryuko raised her leg and swung it at him. He went sprawling backward.

“Because you had done nothing yet.” Ryuko said. “When you were young I saw signs of your violent nature. I knew that you were inherently evil before you were even born.”

A shadow crossed her face.

“But you tried to be normal.” She said softly. “You tried to stay away from this life, because I asked you to. And I… respected that.”

Jack rubbed his cheek as he stood up.

“Respected me?” He repeated. “That’s quite a way to describe it.”

“You asked for an explanation, and I gave it to you.” Ryuko said flatly. “I have always regretted giving birth to you, and always will. The only good thing that came of your birth was that I am no longer able to bear children.”

“You hate kids that much?” Jack asked.

“No.” Ryuko said quietly. “It is myself that I hate.”

Jack disappeared in a flash of aura and reappeared right behind her. Ryuko didn’t even flinch as she brought the back of her hand up and smashed him across the face, breaking his nose.

“You cannot best me in battle.” She said, as he staggered backward, holding his now bloody nose. “My power and experience far surpasses yours.”

Jack grinned. “I have my youth.”

She whirled around on him and slashed with the sword, intent on cutting him in two. But Jack raised his two clawed hands and caught the blade in his hands. He twisted, trying to break the blade in his grip, but it stood steadfast. They glared at each other.

“You’re getting old, ma.” Jack said, grinning. “You were once the strongest woman in the world, right? There are plenty of people stronger than me out there.”

She pressed her weight against him and he slid backward. The sheer strength and power in her was unbelievable.

“I bet Lucille Langley would make short work of you.” Jack said. “She’s a way better Mom, too.”

The sword vanished into thin air and Ryuko darted forward, grabbing his head and yanking him to the floor. He buckled as she raised her knee and smashed it against his head. Jack grimaced, raised his claws, and scratched at her waist. Ryuko grimaced, and knocked him to the floor with a well timed punch.

He fell back, and immediately leapt back up. Before he could get to his feet, however, Ryuko had kicked him again, once more sending him sprawling.

“I am faster than you, and stronger than you.” Ryuko said quietly, as Jack rolled, and leapt to his feet once he had gotten some distance from her. “You cannot defeat me.”

Jack took in a deep breath and exhaled. He stared at her intently. He did not respond.

“I see that you understand the gravity of your situation.” Ryuko said quietly. “You fear me.”

Jack smiled at her.

“Fear you?” He repeated. “What, are you going to take my Nintendo away?”

She lowered her head to her sword and bent her head. Jack continued to goad her.

“What are you going to do, ground me?”

Her eyes flashed upward. The sword flicked up with it. It left her hand and went soaring towards Jack. It turned into a streak of lightning, moving faster than the eye could see.

Jack raised his hands and caught it once again. The lightning fizzled out, and nothing but the steel remained.

“You’ll have to try harder th-“

She was right in front of him. He took a step back, throwing the sword down at her foot blade first as he tried to defend himself. She adjusted her foot, narrowly allowing the blade to bury itself into the floor at her feet, and then kicked out at it. It flung through the air and stabbed Jack straight through the stomach. He grimaced, bending over slightly as Ryuko, with great force, grabbed the handle again and slashed the blade through his side.

It was all Jack could do to keep breathing. He held his side, desperately trying to use his magic to maintain control of his bodily functions as he staggered backwards. Ryuko stared at him.

“I should have done this a long time ago.” She said. “Perhaps now, at last… I will be at peace.”

Jack smiled widely at her.

“I’m going to be a father.”

Shock, anger, and rage washed over her features.

“No.” She said, trying to keep her voice calm. “It can’t be true.”

“It is.” Jack said happily. “The bloodline continues.”

Ryuko grabbed the sword so hard that the hilt shattered into pieces in her grip.

“Who is the Mother?” She demanded. “Tell me!”

“So you can murder them too?” Jack asked. “My child will come kill you when he or she is ready. By then you’ll be even older and more decrepit than you are now…”

Ryuko bristled.

“I’ll hunt them down.” She rasped. “My blood… my power cannot be allowed to fester among ordinary humans!”

“Oh, believe me.” Jack said. “Belladonna is anything but ordinary.”

Ryuko screamed in rage and raised the sword. She plunged it at Jack’s neck, but he ducked. It swished harmlessly over his head, and he lunged in for an uppercut. He unleashed a blow that could shatter bones, right on her chin. She grimaced and tilted her head downward, stopping his punch almost immediately.

She was boiling.

“You….-“ She rasped, as she forced her neck down. Jack’s fist was forced back, and he pulled away, staring at her.

“You really are strong.” He said.

She shook her head. She seemed to be trying to calm herself down.

“Strong?” She repeated, her voice becoming more monotone, almost bored. “There are many souls stronger than I. You, however…”

She appeared within an inch of him and with a furious blow hit him in the stomach, bowling him over.

“Are not one of them.” She finished, as he fell onto his knees. She turned away from him, the sword in her hand seemingly almost forgotten.

“I’ll find your woman and child.” She said. “I’ll kill them both. I cannot allow more creatures like you to walk the Earth.”

Jack grimaced.

“Well, there’s more than one…” He said. “More than I care to remember…”

She whirled on him, her eyes blazing.

“You-“

Jack punched her in the face again. This time she wasn’t fast enough to react to it, and flew backward. Jack quickly turned himself to aura and soared after her. He appeared over her and stomped downward, with both feet. She was slammed into the ground. Ryuko

brought the sword up to slash at his legs, as he leapt back up, did a flip, and pushed himself back down with his magic.

Ryuko raised her arms to block the strike, but Jack neatly avoided the attempt and slammed back down into her. Ryuko spat up blood from her mouth. She took the sword and, at an awkward angle, impaled Jack's leg with it.

Jack had already leapt up again, but the unexpected leverage stopped him in his tracks. He jolted mid-jump as Ryuko pulled herself up, and threw him back down. Jack thrust his hands out, caught himself mid-fall, and kicked out at her face, nailing her in the cheek. She grimaced, ripping the sword from his leg, and then tried to slash it off. Jack let himself fall, rolled forward, and leapt to his feet. Ryuko kicked the back of his head, and he slammed face first into the ground.

She stomped the back of his head with her foot. Her power was phenomenal… it would have easily crushed an ordinary person. Jack struggled vainly as Ryuko stood over him.

"You came with a girl, did you not?" Ryuko asked. "Would she know the identity of the mother of your child?"

Jack struggled vainly as Ryuko brandished the sword.

"I will beat it out of her, if I must." Ryuko said quietly. "If you care for her at all, you will tell me everything I want to know."

"Bitch-"

Ryuko stomped his head again and Jack felt his face break into the floor.

"Answer me!"

Jack felt his body seize up. She had taken the sword and impaled it through his spine. He lay there limply as she increased the pressure on his head, the sword slowly cutting through his body.

Is this it?

Is this… really how it all ends?

Killed by my own Mother…

This… isn't what I wanted.

What did I want?

What do I want?

What does the Order want?

What did Lucille want?

I want

To…

WIN!

"Are you still trying to win?" Ryuko asked, as Jack vainly tried struggling, pushing desperately against the floor. "You are ten years too early to defeat me."

Jack coughed. Blood spurted out of his mouth. It dribbled down his chin and onto the floor. He felt the taste of his own blood in his mouth.

Belladonna… If this does not work…

He bent his head, and focused his magic onto his back. The blood seeping out of the cut in his back shot upward like bullets, slamming into Ryuko. She let out a surprised sound, and pulled away somewhat.

"Was that hemomancy?" She asked, as she wiped at her eye with her hand. "Pathetic…"

"Jack's eyes flashed. The spot of blood that had landed on her face morphed into a razor sharp blade. It penetrated her eye, and she let out an intense shriek of pain as she clutched her head, blinded.

He could see Lucille Langley's smiling face in his own darkening vision.

If you ever fight another dragon, Jack, go for the eyes.

The sword had not dug itself into the floor. He pushed himself off the ground with it still impaled through him. He turned to face

Ryuko, his face dark and impassive. Ryuko clutched her eye, looking furious.

"You will die here, child." She spat. Jack stared at her. He focused what little magical energy he had left in him to shift the sword further inside of him… up till the hilt. The blade poked out in front of his chest, dangerously poised for its next target. He grimaced, clenched his fists, and doggedly stepped forward.

Her left eye completely sealed shut, Ryuko turned her head to keep him in the center of his vision. Almost immediately Jack darted to her bad side, and she turned her head to follow his movements. He struck out at her, and she blocked. She grabbed hold of his arm and was about to throw him, when he shifted his body towards her and impaled her with the sword in his chest.

"Ugh!"

She smiled at him as she gripped his head.

"Do you think… that would stop me?" She asked, as she reached around him and grabbed the hilt of the sword. She pulled it out of her, but before it left Jack an intense burst of electricity ran through him.

His entire body jittered. He gasped, his insides feeling like they were about to explode, as the sword was pulled fully from him.

"You have put me in a difficult position, child." Ryuko said, as Jack stood there limply, unable to even fall to the floor. "I cannot simply kill you, while those that share your blood run amok. But I cannot let you live, either."

She sighed, shaking her head.

"I suppose… I have no choice but to hunt down and exterminate this woman of yours."

Jack tried to speak, but all that came out was a weak sounding cough.

"It is a shame." Ryuko said. "That I have to forsake my vows of pacifism in order to fix your mistake."

Jack chuckled.

"Pacifism?" He repeated. "You believe… you will ever… be at peace?"

Ryuko gave him a hard look. Jack stood completely tall, staring at her.

"The fighting." Jack rasped. "Will never stop."

Ryuko raised her closed fist, as if she were about to kill him. She stood there, as if transfixed, staring at him.

"I am better than you." She said softly. "I do not relish this. But it must be done."

Jack coughed. Blood sputtered out of his mouth. From behind him, he could hear Sophie Langley enter the room. She let out an audible gasp upon seeing him.

"Then why haven't you?" He asked, his voice cold. "Mother?"

"Jack?" Sophie repeated. "What… what did you just say?" She was horrified. She looked between the two of them and, in a flash, a dawn of understanding seemed to race through her.

"Girl." Ryuko said quietly. "Leave us."

"How could you do this to each other?" Sophie demanded. "He's your son!"

Ryuko gave her an intense look. Sophie flinched, and then recoiled, but stood her ground. She did not avert her eyes from her gaze.

And then, Ryuko smiled.

"You are too good for this world." She said softly. "Yes… he is my son. But there is no love shared between us."

"She doesn't deserve it." Jack said, smirking. Ryuko ignored him.

"Jack, why didn't you tell me?" Sophie demanded. "I would have… I would have told Mother! She wouldn't have made you do this!"

"I wanted to do it." Jack said. He stared forward. "Out of everyone I've fought so far… she's the only one where I've understood why it needed to be done."

Sophie stiffened.

“The Order of the Dragon puts Faith above Family, doesn’t it?” Ryuko inquired. “Doubtless your own Mother would betray you as well, if put to the sword.”

“That’s not true.” Sophie said, shaking her head. “She would… she-“

She fell silent, a sinking feeling overwhelming her. Ryuko was right. Lucille would put the Church over her own well being. She did it every day.

“Please leave us.” Ryuko said. “You will not harmed.”

“What about Jack?”

Ryuko tilted her head.

“I will kill him, of course.” She said.

“I can’t let you do that.” Sophie said immediately. She drew her own sword and steeled herself, raising her own head high. Ryuko gave her a look.

“Don’t be stupid, girl.” She said. “You are ten years too early to be challenging me.”

This time Sophie didn’t even flinch. She tightened her grip on her sword and took her stance. Ryuko sighed, closing her eyes.

“So be it.”

Sophie took a step forward, raising her sword to swing.

“Don’t do it, Sophie.”

Sophie stopped. She stared.

“Wha-“

“You can’t win.” Jack said. “Go. Leave me.”

“But-“

“I lost.” Jack said. “I’m going to die here. “

“No- I won’t leave you!”

Sophie took another step forward. Ryuko stood completely still, her eyes closed. Sophie felt a sense of elation. Maybe… if she was fast… faster than she ever had been before…

She raised the sword and advanced, shifting her feet around wildly, and swung. The sword soared. Ryuko stood completely still as the blade connected with her neck at full force.

An intense, vibrating sensation ran through her entire arm as the blade bounced off. Ryuko stood, completely unphased as Sophie stepped back. Her entire arm felt like it was shaking violently. She raised her free hand to clasp it. Her hand quivered so much that her sword fell from her hand.

She glanced up fearfully at Ryuko, certain that the Dragon of the West would soon descend upon her. But she had not moved.

"You should not be so eager to engage in violence." Ryuko said quietly. "Lest you fight one mightier than yourself."

Sophie steadied her hand. She took a deep breath, and summoned the sword back into her hand. It leapt off the floor and into her palm and she swung it in front of her again, considering her next move.

"Do you think yourself a hero?" Ryuko inquired. "This boy is no innocent."

Sophie stepped forward.

"Why are you so eager to throw your life away?"

Sophie augmented the blade with magic and swung. Again the blade simply bounced off. Ryuko's overwhelming power was so great that even her most powerful strikes couldn't draw blood.

"You are no threat to me." Ryuko said quietly. "If I so wished it, you would already be dead."

Sophie grimaced, and raised the sword for another strike. This wasn't going to work. She realized, even before she swung. Once more the sword bounced off.

"What are you fighting for?" Ryuko asked, as Sophie again pulled away, her hand throbbing. "To force your values onto Japan?"

Sophie's hand was still trembling when she swung for the fourth time. This time the blade broke upon contact.

"If you are fighting for this one's sake, your faith is misplaced." Ryuko said, as Sophie took the broken blade and tried stabbing wildly at her with the broken steel. "He is a monster who is only good for killing."

"I know!" Sophie cried out, as she kept stabbing. "But that's what we need!"

Ryuko raised her hand and grabbed Sophie around the neck. Sophie gasped as Ryuko effortlessly lifted her off the ground. Sophie kicked out helplessly at her as Ryuko stared intently at her.

"Need?" Ryuko repeated. "You need to kill me?" She tightened her grip around Sophie's throat. She let out a choking noise. "I have devoted myself to a life of peace. I only raise my hand in self-defense. I am no threat to you, or your Order. And yet you blindly try to destroy me anyway."

Sophie glared at her.

"What are you fighting for?" Ryuko inquired. "What do you hope to accomplish?"

Sophie hung limply in midair. She could not muster the strength to even thrash about. She could feel her vision going dark as she was slowly suffocated.

And then she was released. She fell to the floor, gasping for breath, as Ryuko stood over her.

"I will not kill you." Ryuko said quietly. "Do you know why?"

Sophie let out a sob.

"You have been indoctrinated all your life by your faith." Ryuko said. "You are not fighting for your own ideals. You are fighting because you believe you must."

"Speaking… from experience?" Sophie managed to rasp.

“I do not wish anyone to become like me. Ryuko said. “It has taken a lifetime to come to terms with what I was forced to become, and to decide for myself what I would like to be.”

“And what is it that you want?”

“To be a good person.”

Jack laughed.

Ryuko whirled her head upward. Sophie gasped. The intense aura emanating from her was enough to almost make her pace out.

“Do you have something to say… child?” Her voice was dark and dangerous.

“Yeah.” Jack said. “You’re not a good person.”

Ryuko took a step towards him, accidently stepping on Sophie’s hand. She cried out in pain as her bones shattered.

“You think so?” She breathed. “I, who have done everything in my power to leave this life of bloodshed behind me?”

Jack’s smile widened.

“You tried.”

Without a word Ryuko rushed towards him, the sword in her hand moving to chop off his head. Jack stood there, smiling widely as the sword arced through the air towards his neck.

The sword passed completely through him harmlessly. Ryuko pulled back, shocked, as Jack reformed into solid mass and struck at her face. She reeled back, grimacing, and swung again.

Once more Jack converted his body into pure aura, and the blade sliced harmlessly through him. Sophie gaped at them, amazed.

“He’s…. gotten even stronger…”

Jack’s body was so incapacitated that he couldn’t even move his legs. And yet by converting his body to aura in the middle of combat, he was able to weave and dodge around his enemy.

The blue blur of aura soared up and around her. Ryuko gripped the sword, following it with her eyes, as Jack reappeared. She struck him again, but once more he disappeared. Her attack harmlessly soared through the aura, as it descended upon him, reformed into a physical mass, and then punched her in the face.

She grimaced, taking the blow, and then tried to counterattack. Again Jack disappeared and swirled around her, like a fog.

"I doubt you even understand the gravity of what you're doing." Ryuko said, as she watched the mist. "You have been degrading yourself into your most base form… and then reforming back into a more complex organism. One who takes that shape for too long will simply cease to exist."

She watched the aura carefully, certain that he would become intimidated and reform. To her surprise, however, the aura continued to spread.

"You are more foolish than I thought." Ryuko said. She raised her own hand and unleashed a blast of her own aura. A bright pink orb shot forward, dispersing the aura into nothingness.

"Good-bye." Ryuko said quietly. She kneeled to the ground and set aside the sword. She stared straight ahead at Sophie, who was still wincing in pain.

"Give me your hand." Ryuko commanded. Sophie whimpered, and pulled away. Before she could, however, Ryuko grabbed it.

Sophie winced, as the powerful fingers gripped her broken hand. She was certain that more of her bones were about to break. But instead Ryuko's touch was surprisingly gentle.

Sophie gasped, as a familiar warm sensation flowed throughout her hand. The bones in her hand began reassembling themselves back into place, and sealing themselves back together.

"I have never trained in healing." Ryuko told her, as the pain in her hand slowly dissipated. "I would certainly ask someone to look at it when you return home."

“Oh…. Um… thank you.” Sophie gasped out. Ryuko smiled at her, and Sophie found herself recoiling. The smile faded from Ryuko’s face.

“I suppose you must think of me as a monster.” Ryuko said, her voice quiet. “It is why you are here, after all.”

Sophie said nothing as Ryuko pulled away and kneeled on the ground in front of her. They stared at each other for a long while.

“I always wanted to be a normal girl.” Ryuko said. “I always resented how I was always so different from everyone. When other girls were concerned about boys, I had already killed a hundred men.”

Sophie felt a twang of recognition. There were times when she felt the same way.

Some of her feelings must have shown on her face, because Ryuko smiled at her again.

“Always remember this.” She said. “You are not alone.”

Sophie’s eyes flickered upwards. She could see the remains of Jack’s aura coming back together. In spite of everything his essence had not rejoined the rest of the Universe. It was still stubbornly trying to reform in mid-air.

“Sometimes.” Sophie said. “I want to just give up. Sometimes I wonder what the point of all this is.”

Ryuko was still smiling.

“But then I think about all of the good I do.” Sophie said. “I think about all of the terror we’ve stopped, and the lives we’ve saved… and all of the sacrifices I’ve made feel like they were worth it.”

Ryuko’s smile faded. She was staring at Sophie rather hard.

“If you wish to save lives, why have you killed so many people?”

Jack appeared above her. He seemed completely out of sorts, with no sense of direction or timing. He spun wildly, falling straight to the ground blow. Ryuko adjusted the hilt of her sword, and Jack

slammed straight into it head first. The force of the fall caused him to bounce back upward and then to the ground. He didn't move.

"Because." Sophie said. "I have a duty." Despite her personal misgivings, Sophie found herself speaking with a shocking amount of conviction. "Those who would use their strength to terrorize the world must be destroyed."

"How, exactly, am I a terror?"

Sophie fell silent. She wasn't able to look her enemy in the eye.

"Before today I haven't fought in a quarter of a century." Ryuko said. "I am not a threat to you, or anyone else. And yet you still seek to destroy me. One might think that you are a terror… if you had the strength to destroy me, that is."

"I do have the strength."

Ryuko glared at her. Sophie quailed.

"False bravado will get you nowhere." Ryuko said coldly. "And you shouldn't think that you will be venerated upon your death. Your religion will mark your crusade as a failure, as they do all those who fail to put their enemies to the sword."

Sophie's eyes flashed. The image of Margaret Mire flashed through her mind. How she had grieved when she was killed in battle, and even now reflected on her memory and legacy.

Sophie glared hatefully at her.

"I see that I have angered you." Ryuko said, sounding amused. "But no matter."

Jack groaned in pain.

"How is he still breathing?" Ryuko asked absentmindedly, speaking to herself more than Sophie as she picked up her sword. She raised it and brought it straight down onto Jack. Sophie screamed as the blade penetrated his body.

"Stop!" She cried. "He's… he's your son!"

She was crying. She had no idea why, but suddenly tears were falling out of her face and onto the floor. Ryuko stopped, and stared at her.

“There is no love between us.” She said simply.

“A normal mother would never kill her child.” Sophie said. “You’ll never be normal if you do it!”

Ryuko stared at her. It was an icy, cold look.

“I have told myself the same thing for decades.” She said quietly. “It is the only reason why it has not already been done.”

She set the sword down in front of her. They stared at each other. Sophie’s eyes still misty with tears. She lacked the energy to even wipe them away.

“I have no choice.” Ryuko said quietly. “I must let you go.”

Sophie stiffened.

“If Jack truly has had a child, I must eliminate it.” She continued. “I have no wish to harm your faith. I promise you. When I come to take his head, I will destroy no one other than his family.”

She stood up. She left the blade lying on the floor on front of her.

Ryuko stepped out of the room onto the patio outside. Sophie could see her shadow through the screen door as it bent over, poured a kettled a tea into a cup, and took a sip from it.

Sophie felt sick. She shakily tried to stand, stumbled, and was forced to crawl her way over to Jack.

“Jack?” She said. “You… alive?”

There was no answer, but there was the sound of heavy breathing. Sophie gritted her teeth and raised her hand. A wash of green energy emanated from her, and it fell over Jack. Closing the most severe of his wounds and easing his pain. He still did not awake.

Sophie grimaced. She fought off the intense pain in her body as she stood, wrapped his arm around her, and hoisted him off the ground. Despite her size, she was easily able to carry him to the door. She

was struggling much more with the pain she was in Her mind was turbulent: they had failed.

They stumbled their way back to the city, where she checked both of them into a hospital. Her hand was still being worked on when she got received a phone call from her superiors.

“Report.”

Sophie swallowed. “We failed.”

Silence on the other end. Sophie was beginning to think she had been hung up on.

“Did the Dragon survive?”

“Yes.”

“Return once you are able and give your full report.”

She returned the phone to the hospital and lay back down on her back, staring up at the ceiling. The pain in her hand didn’t bother her. What she was worried most about was admitting failure in front of her Mother.

…

They flew back to the Village before they were even fully healed. Jack’s injuries required constant attention, but Sophie was more than well trained to deal with him now that he had been looked at by professionals. He seemed rather quiet on their way back. Sophie could not blame him. This was their first assignment ever that had ended in complete and total failure.

“Do you think… I won’t be allowed to continue fighting?”

Sophie gave a look at him in surprise.

“Of course I don’t.” She said. “We need you.”

He said nothing more. He seemed very much unlike himself.

“Look.” Sophie said. “Knights of the Dragon keep fighting until they die. Once you-“

“I’m not a knight though.”

Sophie blinked. She had completely forgotten.

"We'll have to fix that." She said, surprised. "I'll talk to Mother about it."

To her very great surprise, he smiled at her.

When they landed in Italy Sophie immediately had Jack taken to a secure location to be looked at by Healers… Doctors who specialized in using magic to restore injuries. As soon as Jack was taken to be examined, Sophie made her way back to her home to make her report.

Her Mother was sitting up waiting for her. She had been working… books lay out sprawled all around her as she sat twirling a pencil in between her fingers. Sophie greeted her cordially, but Lucille was straight to the point.

"Report."

"We failed."

Sophie had to stop herself from flinching: She was almost certain that her Mother would be angry with her. But the rebuke never came.

"I see." Lucille said. "No matter. We cannot win every battle. And Ryuko was far from the most critical of the ten targets."

Sophie couldn't contain herself.

"Mother, did you know that Ryuko was Jack's Mother?"

Lucille gave her a sharp look. It was one of the most intense looks that Sophie had ever gotten from her.

"What?"

Sophie, immediately, repeated everything that had happened that night. Lucille was staring rather intently at her throughout the entire report, so much so that Sophie worried that something was horribly wrong. When she finished she took in a deep breath, glad that it was all over. Lucille was still staring at her.

“He must have inherited the Dragon Within from her.” Lucille said. “It explains his extraordinary growth… she must have done everything in her power to cripple him while he was young.” She gave Sophie another hard look. “Who is the Father? Do you know?”

Sophie shook her head.

“A pity.” Lucille said. She seemed to be calming down somewhat. “But if what you say is true… than Ryuko is now our enemy.”

Sophie swallowed. The thought of another dragon attacking the Cathedral, so soon after The Eye of the Dragon had been defeated, was daunting.

“I will need to speak to Jack about this.” Lucille said. “He should not have kept this from us. I would never have made him fight her if I had known…”

She looked somewhat upset.

“It’s terrible.” Sophie said, her voice grim. “How- she really wanted to kill him. How could anyone hate their child that much…?”

She shook her head, trying to hide tears. “And she was nice to me, in spite of everything…”

Lucille stood up. She made her way over to Sophie, and to her very great surprise wrapped her arms around her in a tight hug.

“It’ll be alright.” Lucille whispered.

And Sophie cried.

….

One Fight Remaining

The Jaw of the Dragon

Kazakhstan

It was an excruciating time for both of them. Jack remained in extensive care for quite some time. His injuries that Ryuko had dished out was nothing compared to the strain his body had grown through when it was almost absorbed into the Universal Aura. He required a lot of time off and rest, and it was making him restless.

“Let me go, I want to fight.”

“Not yet you’re not.” Belladonna said stubbornly, as she forced him back into bed. “You’re still recovering.”

Jack scowled at her and tried pushing her off of him.

“Let me go for a run.”

“No.”

“A walk?”

“No!”

“Wheelchair?”

“Okay fine.”

Jack tried to get to the chair himself, but was completely taken off guard by Belladonna grabbing him and throwing him in herself.

“I can walk, you know.”

“Not right now you can’t.” Belladonna sniffed, as she wheeled the chair out of the room. “And if you don’t recover properly you might not come back next time.”

“Maybe that won’t be so bad…”

Belladonna smacked the best of his head.

“How am I supposed to recover if you keep injuring me?”

“If you just kept still-“

The two argued back and forth as Belladonna wheeled him out of the house and into the town. Plenty of people stopped to chat with them along the way… Jack’s successes in battle had won him many admirers in the Church. Belladonna, as always, was completely ignored.

“You should try and speak up more.” Jack said, after the third of fourth time this happened. “It’s not like you to hide that you’re upset.”

“I’m not upset, I-“

“Don’t lie to me.”

Belladonna sighed, shaking her head.

“I’m not human.” She repeated, gloomily. “I don’t deserve respect.”

“And yet I do?”

“That’s different.” Belladonna’s voice became much more serious. “The Church believes that dragons are higher life forms than you mere mortals. Constructs… artificial life forms, like myself… are looked down on.”

“That’s stupid.” Jack said. “You’re a Knight, aren’t you? You should get some respect.”

“There’s a very big divide between those in the Church who wish to use me to the best of my ability and those who believe that I should be killed.” Belladonna said. “No matter what I do… I cannot escape what I am.”

They came to a stop in a little field that they had often used for training over the past year.

“Fighting for the Order is the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” Jack said. “If I didn’t think that, I wouldn’t do it.”

Belladonna gave him a soft smile.

“Don’t misunderstand me.” She said. “The Order is the best thing that’s happened to me too.” She said. “Or, rather, one person that came from it was. In her memory I’ll stick with it until the very end.”

The trees above them rustled. The two of them looked up, surprised, as Avelina Anghel landed gingerly on the branch above them, her pure white wings spread wide.

“Greetings.” Avelina said cheerfully, bouncing up and down on the branch. Leaves fell down around them. Belladonna rolled her eyes and leaned forward, shielding Jack from them with her body. “I come bearing news!”

“What kind of news?”

Avelina leapt upward and glided down. Her bare feet touched the grass beneath them, just as the white wings sprouting out of her back folded back into place, completely out of sight. She smiled at them, her white hair looking rather odd in the midday sun.

"Dr. Langley has located the Jaw of the Dragon!"

Belladonna looked taken aback, but Jack was nonplussed.

"Who?"

Avelina clapped her hands together and smiled.

"Oh, Dr. Langley is the foremost expert on-"

"He knows who Lucille is." Belladonna snapped. "Tell us about the Jaw of the Dragon."

"Oh." Avelina looked suddenly despondent. "I, uh, have no idea." She leapt up back into the tree.

"I'll go ask!"

She raised her wings, and then took off.

Belladonna rolled her eyes. "What a ditz." She said derisively. "I don't know why she keeps talking to us."

She took Jack's wheelchair and wheeled it back into town. Jack was nodding off by this point.

"You're in no condition to fight." Belladonna said. "You should refuse."

"And miss my chance to prove myself?" Jack shook his head. "Not likely."

"You've proven yourself several times over." Belladonna said. "If anyone in the Church doesn't see that…"

"I wasn't nearly strong enough to win all of these fights." Jack said. "I was lucky in a lot of them… With Fenrir, with Avalon… I couldn't even beat Ryuko."

Belladonna stared at him. Even now, he seemed unwilling to acknowledge the Dragon of the West as his Mother. If it hadn't been

for Sophita Langley's official report, she herself wouldn't have known.

Jack had fallen asleep by the time that they returned to the house. Belladonna got him out of the chair and put him to bed. She was about to leave and have lunch when she found Asamova at the door.

"Is Jack in?"

Belladonna frowned. She had disliked Asamova from the start.

"He's resting." She said, her voice cold. "If it's about the Jaw of the Dragon… it absolutely can wait."

"No, I was sent to interrogate him." Asamova said. She smiled, ignoring Belladonna's shocked look. "Dr. Langley believes I can get to the bottom of this business with his Mother."

Belladonna felt her temper flare. Asamova had barely been here a month and had already built a better relationship with the Church than she ever had.

"Better than his girlfriend?" She snapped.

"Yes." Asamova said bluntly. "You aren't exactly suited to dealing with his emotional turmoil.."

They stared at each for a couple of seconds. Belladonna was a hard woman, but in the end she had to look away. She knew that Asamova was completely right.

"I don't like this." Belladonna said, as she led Asamova into the house. "He doesn't need his mind to be poked about by you."

"There will be no poking." Asamova told her, annoyed. "It'll be a simple therapy session."

"A therapy session where you poke around in his mind."

"I will not harm him. You have my word."

Belladonna shot her an irritated glare. Asamova spoke with an odd sort of reverence in her voice. Much like Avelina before her, she had seemed to think she had struck up a kind of relationship with Jack.

“I’m warning you.” Belladonna said. “Fall in love with him and you die.”

Asamova’s face remained expressionless. Belladonna half thought to deny her entry. After all, there were very real health concerns involved with Jack’s recovery. Now was not the time to probe his mind, in her opinion. However before she could come to a decision Lucille Langley entered the hallway.

“Ah, Sonechka.” She said. “You’ve arrived.”

“Dr. Langley.” Sonechka said formally.

“Is the Construct giving you a hard time?”

Belladonna scowled at her.

“No, Doctor.” Asamova answered. “She was leading me right to him.”

“What’s this I hear about the Jaw of the Dragon?” Belladonna asked loudly, changing the subject.

Lucille’s eyes fell on her.

“Ahhh.” She said. “You’ve heard. Avelina told you, I take it?”

“Jack’s in no condition to fight.” Belladonna said. “As his lover, I refuse-“

“You have no right to make decisions for him.” Lucille said coldly. “Not only are you not his wife, you never can be.”

Bellladonna gritted her teeth, trying to hide her mounting temper. Asamova, to her surprise, came to her defense.

“Belladonna isn’t wrong.” She said, clearly keeping her tone politely neutral. “Sending Jack out again in his state would be suicide for him. As a doctor I can’t-“

“He will go as soon as he is ready.” Lucille said. “But I want him to know all of the facts now. The situation is rather delicate, and a single misstep could lead to a new Cold War.”

Asamova looked taken aback. “A Cold War?” She repeated. “How so?”

“The Jaw of the Dragon is the only thing keeping Russia from invading its neighbors and becoming a global superpower once again.”

Belladonna was unimpressed.

“How does he manage that?”

Lucille adjusted her glasses. They glinted a little in the light.

“Well.” She said. “Like Ryuko, the Jaw of the Dragon’s power is so great that no single individual would dare try to take him down. No army could hope to topple a man of his stature, and Russia is not willing to send its best superhumans to destroy him. They know their chances are futile.”

“We had no problems sending Jack to die.” Belladonna said snidely.

“We are a religion above all of that.” Lucille said. “Our role is to destroy threats to humanity. Not to control territory or people. A Knight of the Order of the Dragon is proud to die in the name of the Lord.”

“Hey Asamova, you don’t believe any of this shit do you?” Belladonna asked. She had never been a believer in the Church. She still very much considered herself pagan.

“I do.” Asamova said, sounding surprised that she had even asked. “I’m in the process of being confirmed right now.”

Lucille smiled.

“Good girl.” She said appreciatively. “There are many knights who could learn from your example.” Belladonna scowled.

“But yes, back to the subject at hand…” Lucille gestured to the door. “The Jaw needs to be destroyed. Although he has destroyed many prominent threats to the world, purely for his own amusement, he also tends to savagely attack the local population. Not just humans and animals, but trees and other wildlife as well. He must be eliminated. He has become a threat to the stability of the region. However…”

“He’s the only thing stopping the Russians from invading.” Asamova said.

“Precisely.” Lucille said. “And that is the problem. Once he is killed… or perhaps even just incapacitated… Putin will the take the opportunity to strike. It is very possible that this is a fight that could change the course of history. And of course, Putin is not the only force within Russia that has interest in the region. The New Red Army has interest in reforming the USSR as well.”

Asamova’s eyes darkened.

“We can’t let that happen.”

“I agree.” Lucille said. “But neither can we do nothing. The Jaw of the Dragon must die, but the Russians must be prevented from invading, at any cost.”

“You’re suggesting a larger operation, then.”

“Correct.” Lucille said. “Jack will fight the Jaw as we originally planned, but we must have some others on standby. I would ask the two of you to join me.”

“Are you sure you’re willing to trust a filthy pagan construct?” Belladonna asked sardonically.

“My lady.” Asamova said formally. “I am honored, but Russia is my homeland. I’m not sure-“

‘This is your home now.” Lucille said. “You will fight and die for our faith, Sonechka. Doubtless this will be your opportunity to make amends for all the evil you have done.”

Asamova’s face tightened.

“Very well.” She said quietly. “May I examine my patient now? Or should I go die?”

“Die now, please.” Belladonna said.

Lucille gave her the go ahead, and Asamova soon found herself alone in the room with Jack. Belladonna tried to come in after her, but was quickly cut off by Lucille.

“My apologies.” Asamova said, as she sat down next to him. Jack did not respond. He had completely passed out. She briefly thought herself odd for apologizing to someone who couldn’t hear her, but soon enough he would.

It was not long until she was deep within the recesses of his mind, quietly watching his dreams. It wasn’t the bizarre erotic fantasy she had seen last time, nor was it a violent gory one. Instead Jack seemed unusually contemplative. They were in an empty green field with only a single tree.

“Hello.”

“Hi.”

Asamova sat down next to him and they looked out over the sea of grass together.

“You’re frightened.” Asamova said.

“No.”

“You won’t admit it, but it’s true.”

Jack didn’t answer right away.

“Even if I could beat her.” He said. “I’m not sure that I would.”

“Your mother?” Asamova said gently.

“Yeah.” Jack said. “Being around Sophie and Lucille so much I feel… sad… that my Mother is so terrible.”

“You kept these feelings to yourself.” Asamova noted. “Or… perhaps you can’t bear to face them on your own.”

Jack turned to look at her. This was a clear sign that his consciousness was aware of her presence, and was openly addressing her.

“I never asked for a therapist.”

“But you need me.” Asamova said gently. “You must prepare for your next battle.”

“My next…?” Jack looked troubled. “I… I’m not going to fight her again?”

“Not yet.” Asamova said. “You are not ready.”

Jack bristled.

“The fact that you are in so much conflict over this matter shows me that this is true.” Asamova said. “You must move on.”

She felt his mind becoming more active, and she had to pull herself away from his mind for a moment. He was waking up. Soon she was looking down at him, in real life, and he was smiling at her.

“I’m getting better at figuring out when you’re not just a fantasy.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. We talk.”

Asamova laughed, and tucked her hair behind her ear. “What am I like in your fantasies, then?”

“Read my mind and you’ll see.”

“My apologies.” Asamova said, smiling slightly. She knew perfectly well what his fantasies were like. “Business comes first. How are you feeling?”

He let out an exasperated groan.

“Not good?”

“You could make it better.”

“Let’s finish our session first.” Asamova said. “Tell me about what’s troubling you.”

She listened to him rather intently, as he tried to lie to her about his deepest feelings. She was perceptive enough to understand that he was lying to himself more than to her.

“When I see her again I’ll kill her. Believe it. As soon as I’m better.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Lucille Langley said.

Jack gave a small start, knocking over the lamp on the tableside to the floor. Clearly he had not heard noticed her come in. Asamova

quickly caught it with Telekinesis, preventing it from shattering.

“What?” Jack asked, sounding somewhat angry. “But I have-“

“Something urgent has come up.” Lucille said. “You MUST fight your other opponent.”

Jack clenched his fist.

“You expect me to simply… give up?”

“I’m telling you that now is not the time.” Lucille said. “We have need of your talents elsewhere.”

Jack was completely silent for a solid ten seconds.

“Who am I going to kill?” He growled.

…

“Don’t bungle it all this time.” Sophie told him helpfully as they boarded the plane to Kazakhstan. “Just hit him harder than he hits you.”

“Good idea.” Jack said. “You get that idea from your folder?”

Sophie took the file documenting each of the ten fighters that Jack was sent to fight and threw it up into the air. It caught fire and blew away into ashes.

“Nothing I say will change the way you fight.” Sophie said. “Just be careful, alright?”

Jack nodded, and fell silent as the two of them settled into their last flight together.

“You know, for better or for worse, this will be the last time we work together like this.” Sophie said. “I think I’ll kind of miss it.”

“Will you?” Jack asked dryly. He wasn’t in the mood.

“Yeah.” Sophie said. “I mean… it was so cool, just setting you on our enemies like that. You were like my own personal attack dog.”

“I’m sure we’ll see each other again.” Jack said. “When both of us are proper knights.”

Sophie smiled widely at him.

They landed at their destination and made preparations for their trip into the desert.

“The Jaw of the Dragon is a cannibal.” Sophie informed him. “Forces from all over… Iran, Turkey, Kazakhstan, and Russia…. Have orders to kill him on sight. It hasn’t worked yet.”

“He kills and eats anyone who comes across in the desert.”

“Right.” Sophie said, clapping her hands together. “And he’s not picky… he’s been known to take down dinosaurs weighing over a hundred tons.”

“So have I.” Jack said coolly, staring out of the window. Sophie glowered at him.

“Tiny Timmy wasn’t that big, Jack…” She said reproachfully, but he ignored her. She pouted at him, before turning her attention back to locating the Jaw.

To her great surprise, however, Jack stood up and opened the door to the car.

“And where exactly are you going?”

“I can sense his presence.” He said. He raised a thick blue claw and pointed out, over the desert. “There.”

“You only know that because I told you.” Sophie said, exasperated. “Let me narrow it down a bit, won’t you?”

Jack opened the door and stepped out. Sophie stared after him.

“If the Jaw doesn’t kill him, the desert will.” She scoffed. Her face fell for a moment at the thought, but she quickly found herself returning to her work.

…

The desert storm swirled all around him. Intense blasts of sand slammed into his bare face, and he grimaced. The heat of the desert had led him to crave water for hours. But it was nothing compared to the desire to kill his enemy.

He came to a stop and stared ahead. Through the flurry of the desert sand he could make out the shape of a large tank. It seemed to not be moving. He was sure that it had long ago fell into disuse.

He was still looking at it when the shadow of a man stood tall on top of the turret. The shadow bent over, and with an incredible show of force ripped the top of the tank off with his teeth. The metal designed to wage war crumpled as he chewed.

Jack stood there, watching him as the entire tank was devoured before his eyes. Every bolt, every plate, every bit of ammunition disappeared into the void. The desert wind was intense: so intense that they couldn't fully see each other. But they both knew what was going to happen next.

The shadow finished his meal and leaned back. He opened his mouth and an intense burst of air burst out from it.

The desert storm disappeared. The two stared at each other, surrounded by nothing but desert. They said nothing to each other.

The Jaw took in a deep breath, and then breathed out an intense wave of fire. Jack stood there, arms braced in front of him, expecting to simply take the hit. But instead an intense feeling of pain erupted into his arms and across his arms. The almost impenetrable scales of the dragon showed no signs of damage: somehow the flame caused a burning sensation anyway.

The fire stopped, and suddenly the Jaw was there. He was bigger than Jack had initially assumed… wide, broad shouldered, and more dragon than human. He brought down a massive fist onto Jack, and he countered it with his own. The sheer force of the blow sent waves rippling through the desert: Sand was kicked up and drifted away from them.

Jack raised his left hand and curved it so that the blades on his fingers were sticking outward. He thrust it forward into the face of his enemy. The Jaw grimaced, his body going slack somewhat as he tried to rip the Claw out of his cheek. He regained control of his

senses and threw his head back, leading Jack to rip the skin completely off of that side.

It was a gruesome sight. The teeth and muscles under the skin were overdeveloped. They looked more as if they belonged to a monster than a man. But then again, a monster was what he was.

Jack's momentum after ripping the man's cheek straight off left him wide open. The Jaw raised his fist and knocked him in the side of the head. Jack recoiled, slightly, bending over, and the Jaw leapt up on top of him, throwing his entire weight down on top of his enemy.

Jack glowered. He twisted, wrapping his arm around the Jaw's body, and threw him into the sand. The Jaw landed with a surprisingly amount of force: his sheer size and weight led to him forming a small crater where he landed. Jack fell on him, claws raised, intent on tearing his guts out, but the Jaw opened his massive mouth and an even more intense burst of fire shot out. Jack recoiled, backing away, as the Jaw leapt to his feet and advanced, hunched over, his eyes gleaming.

Jack punched the air, and a small burst of aura shot out, and connected with his face. It dissipated immediately upon contact. The Jaw's own aura was so powerful that Jack's couldn't even penetrate it. Jack grimaced, ran his foot along the ground, and kicked up a bunch of sand towards his enemy's face.

The Jaw raised his hand to cover his eyes, and Jack was on him, targeting his midriff. He slashed and diced his stomach, trying to tear our his insides. The blades managed to penetrate his skin, but he could not tear it open.

It was much like how Sophie couldn't even scratch Ryuko… his body was simply too strong to do any real damage to. But instead of panicking, like Sophie had, Jack felt a thrill of excitement run through him.

This

This is what I LIVE for

Fighting your own kind…

Nothing is more gratifying!

The Jaw of the Dragon grabbed his arms, restraining him, and with a lunge went to bite his neck. Sensing danger, Jack countered it with a headbutt, stopping him in his tracks. He was smiling the entire time. He had come so close to death… and yet…

Yet…

The Jaw pulled at his arms, trying to rip them out of his sockets. Jack raised his legs, and using the Jaw's iron grip on him as leverage, kicked out with both legs against his face. The Jaw recoiled, his grip on Jack loosening. Jack flipped backwards, landing on his feet, and then leapt forward, moving in for another punch. The Jaw recovered, and then brought a massive hand down onto Jack's head.

He slammed into the sand with force. The Jaw almost immediately followed up with another body slam, slamming his weight down onto Jack's back. He cried out in pain, his bones cracking under the pressure.

What am I doing?

Am I…

About to lose?

The Jaw bent his head over to rip of Jack's leg, but Jack unleashed such an intense aura explosion that the Jaw was thrown straight into the air, off of him. He pushed himself off the ground and took off after him, not giving him any time to recover. The Jaw spun around wildly as Jack came up from below and uppercut him right on the chin, sending him spinning around the other way.

Jack soared past him, and with a burst of magic, sent himself crashing back down, slamming himself into him with force. The Jaw cried out, spitting out waves of fire at him as they descended, and Jack felt the burning flame envelop his entire face. He grimaced, but they kept moving downward.

They slammed into the ground with intense force. Jack leapt off and spun through the air as the Jaw lay flat on his back, staring upward. Jack barely had time to wonder whether he won when an intense burst of flame leapt out at him.

This burst of flame was much more potent than the meager one that had come before: Jack screamed in anguish as he, unable to defend himself, took the full force of the blast.

When the flames dissipated, his charred body fell to the ground, head first. It slammed into the ground, and he fell over to lay beside his opponent. They stared up at the sky for a split moment, taking in the peace and quiet, before both of them got to their feet.

They stared at each other. Although the fight had not been nearly as long or hard as some others, Jack could already feel the pressure. Someone wasn't leaving the desert alive.

"Raaaaagh!"

They both screamed simultaneously and swung their arms. Again their fists connected, but this time the impact didn't leave nearly as much of a impact. Both of them had been severely weakened by each other's blows… but neither of them was going to lie down and quit, either.

They pulled their hands back and slammed them together again. This time Jack's hardened, clawed hands managed to break the bones on the Jaw's fist. He pulled away, scowling, as Jack went in for another punch on that side.

The fist went straight to the Jaw's mouth. He opened his mouth wide and clamped down.

"ARRRRRRGH!"

The scales on Jack's arm shattered like tissue paper. The Jaw ripped his arm upward, completely ripping it off. Jack pulled away, ignoring the bloody stump on his right hand, and immediately moved in with his left. Before the Jaw could swallow the claw whole, Jack punched his stomach so hard that he was forced to spit it out.

The claw landed harmlessly on the ground as Jack pulled back for another strike. The Jaw lunged, grabbed his arm, and went in for another bite.

"ARGH!"

Jack stepped back, the bleeding stumps on both of his arms squirting blood across the desert. The Jaw smiled, and bent down to his head.

Jack raised the stumps to defend himself, and immediately new claws sprung up from where the old ones had been ripped off. The Jaw had no time to react when Jack thrust his new arms into his mouth and pried it open.

The Jaw struggled vainly, but Jack quickly worked. He gritted his teeth and, with a mighty lurch, gripped the upper and lower halves of his mouth.

And with one furious rip, Jack tore the man in half, right down the middle. His blood poured over him as he stood there, in the desert, gasping for breath. He could barely move. The shock and awe of what had just happened completely overwhelmed him.

He stood there, completely blankly, as over the horizon an entire battalion of tanks came rolling towards him. They came to a stop about a hundred feet away and looked on at them.

"The Jaw of the Dragon is dead!"

"Long live the Soviet Union!"

Jack stood there, completely lost in his reverie, as the tanks rolled past him, towards their next conquest. He stared upward at the sky, and wondered idly what the next fight would be like.

END

A Message from Cody Lee

Hello everyone. Cody Lee here. Thank you all for sticking with this project until the very end. This project has been a monumental milestone for me. Being me first direct sequel, I felt that it really needed to raise the bar from where it had been previously. It's hard

to believe that only a couple of years ago I genuinely thought that it would never get made. But here we are.

The Order of the Dragon Trilogy will conclude with the third entry, Heart of the Dragon. Please remember to leave a review on Amazon, and continue supporting future projects just like this. Thank you.

If you enjoyed this book, please be sure to check out all of my published work.

Eye of the Dragon (2019)

Cruel and Beautiful (2019)

Rabbit Hole (2021

Lauren Frey (2022)

Again, thank you all for your support. I will see you all next time.